

The Real Shit by Jancys-Blue-Bayou

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Summary: "You're young, attractive, you've got chemistry, history, plus the real shit: Shared trauma." Follows Nancy and Jonathan through missing scenes in season 2 and perhaps beyond. Jancy. Rated T for very occasional swearing and occasional hints at "adult" themes.

1. You don't have to do this

"You feel like skipping fourth period?"

Like he'd ever say no to her.

"Sure."

xxx

She explained her plan to him as he drove to Radio Shack. They need hard, real proof of what those people had done. It couldn't be her words against theirs. So they needed to use their words against them. They had to get a confession, an admission of culpability. And they needed it on tape.

The store was empty except for Bob behind the counter when they entered.

"Hey Bob," Jonathan greeted awkwardly.

"Hi Jonathan!" Bob exclaimed, surprised to see him in his store, with a girl in tow. "School let you out early?"

"Uh...yeah."

Bob laughed and waved him off.

"Don't worry, I won't tell your mom," he knew Jonathan wasn't exactly crazy about the fact that he was dating his mother, but he really wanted to connect with Joyce's older boy as well, he supposed playing it cool instead of ratting him out for playing hookie with a girl couldn't hurt his chances.

Jonathan just nodded awkwardly and glanced around the store.

"Hi, I'm Bob," he came around the counter to greet Nancy.

"Nancy," she smiled and gave him a small wave.

"Nice to meet you. So, what brings you two here?"

Bob led the way to the shelf where Nancy quizzed him about the difference in quality between different tape recorders, looking for the one with best ability to clearly pick up sounds that would also fit into her purse. They walked back to the counter when she'd eventually settled on a model.

"Hey I'll throw in some blank tapes for you, I've got way too many lying around here anyways."

"Oh, you don't have to do that!"

"Nonsense, any... friend, of Jonathan is a friend of mine."

"Thanks! Nice to meet you," Nancy answered, deciding to gloss over Bob's little pause before he settled on "friend".

"You too! See you later Jonathan!"

"Bye."

"I like him!" She announced as they walked back to his car.

"Of course you do, he gave you a discount and free tapes. And he isn't spending the night at your house," he smirked. She gave him a light shove with her elbow.

"He's nice, and what, doesn't your mom deserve someone nice?"

"Yeah, yeah. I just wish he didn't try so hard to be friends with me."

She rolled her eyes.

"What?"

"Of course he has to try hard! Becoming your friend ain't exactly an easy feat!" She ribbed him.

"Okay, point taken," he smiled.

xxx

"Let's burn that lab to the ground."

The sheer determination in her eyes and weight behind her words as she said it made him completely sure. They were going to get justice. Even if this journalist guy didn't deliver, they were going to take down Hawkins Lab, because he knew Nancy wouldn't ever give up, and she couldn't be stopped. Her plan was ingenious. And he would do everything in his power to help her see it through.

"So, here, 7:45 tomorrow morning?" He asked as he pulled up to the curb opposite her house.

"You don't have to do this, you know?"

"I know, but I want to. I'm with you."

She nodded seriously.

"So, 7:45?" He asked again.

"Yeah, 7:45. See you then," she smiled quickly at him as she exited the car.

"Bye."

xxx

"So what did you write on the note then? To your mom," she suddenly asked, looking up from the map she had spread out in her lap.

"Oh, uh. Just the truth, that I was helping you out with something important and that it'd take a while."

"Oh."

"Well, she wouldn't exactly buy it if I said I was staying over at a friend's house, would she?"

"Guess not," she laughed.

"Plus I can't lie to her. Not after everything."

She nods in understanding.

xxx

"I think Steve and I broke up, by the way," she blurts out after they've been driving in comfortable silence for awhile to one of Jonathan's mixtapes.

"Sorry."

xxx

"You okay?"

"Yeah. It's weird, I guess I should feel more bad about it."

"I don't think you have to feel a certain way about it. It's your business how you feel."

"Yeah. I wish I hadn't drunk so much at the party but at the same time, a lot of truths got out, I guess... stuff I've ignored. Maybe it's for the best..."

She trailed off, thinking. More of that drunken night had come back to her since. She remembered standing in front of her mirror, thinking she really didn't want to go. But Steve would be so disappointed. She hadn't really been out much since last year. Since that night. But Steve had been so good, so patient, all this time. Pretend to be normal teenagers for a night. She could do that for him, right? But already as Steve pulled up to the curb outside Tina's house she knew it would be tough. She hadn't felt like a normal teenager for over a year. She felt like the weirdest person in the world. She would need help. Hence, alcohol. The more she drank, the more she could feel all the barriers she'd put up to guard her feelings, loosen. She always thought twice about what she said before she said it. But that night in the bathroom there was no barrier between her brain and her mouth.

What bugged her was how she couldn't say it the next day.

A normal teenager would mope around or spend all her time crying in bed after a breakup, she thought. But she hadn't, she hadn't felt like moping or crying at all. She'd made a plan to get justice and was now deep into executing it with Jonathan and she hadn't looked

back. She didn't even miss him, even though she'd gotten so used to having him around, she hadn't thought at all about Steve until now. She supposed that was weird too.

xxx

"So, you making up for lost time?" She asked as she got out of her own head, picking up the empty case for the mixtape Jonathan had shoved in earlier.

"What?"

"*Talking Heads mix 1*" she read of the handwritten label.

"Oh," he laughed. "Well at least I had already finished *Deadeye Dick*."

She chuckled slightly, adding: "I've only read *Slaughterhouse-Five*."

"Yeah, that's the best one."

It was quiet for a second as *Houses in Motion* stopped and *Life During Wartime* began.

"It's the first of four, by the way."

"What?"

"*Talking Heads mix 1*. I've got three more here somewhere."

They both laughed.

"But I think I've got some Blondie too, on one of the punk mixes," he added, remembering the poster in her room.

"Sounds great," she smiled.

xxx

"I want them off."

She abruptly turned away from him. What the hell was that supposed to mean, "only for a month"? How long did he need?! Yeah, she understood he needed to be with his family, of course she got that.

But it's not like she asked of him to ignore them and come running to her, just... something. She recalled that month... month and a half really, she'd waited. It had been absolutely horrible. Grieving Barb while she couldn't even tell her parents and everyone else just forgot about her. The pressure of suddenly being aware of the fact that monsters and dark dimensions were very real and not being able to talk about that either. Knowing that the government was evil and willing to cover up every atrocious deed, all the while continuing to spy on the whole town. Seeing her little brother spending every day depressed in the basement clutching a walkie-talkie and finding no way to comfort him ("I'm sure she's alright" didn't really cut it when they both knew she had no way of being sure of that at all).

And the nightmares, being chased by the Demogorgon, not finding Jonathan's voice in the dark. Seeing Barb's face every time she closed her eyes. And most of all the crippling loneliness. No Barb at her side. No light in the world. At the same time questioning who she was. That week had brought out something new in her. Or maybe it had always been there but hadn't come out earlier. That part of her that didn't back down or give up. That part of her that could handle a gun. That part of her that slapped a boy if he called her a slut in front of the whole town. That part of her that planned a fiery trap for a monster. But did giving in to that mean letting go of who she used to be? The normal teenager who had a place and a role in the minefield that was Hawkins High, who had a popular boyfriend, a 4.0 GPA and... a dead best friend. She hesitated inbetween, afraid of letting go but at the same time scared of treading on in the same tracks. Being just another suburban girl and then end up like her mother. But it had been easier to fall back on Steve then, and try to restore at least some semblance of her old life. Easier to try to ignore all that happened, burying it deep deep inside.

Way to go Byers, he thought to himself as he turned off the lights. Same old Byers, saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. He seriously doubted his ability to interact with other human beings at all sometimes. Interacting with Nancy had been easy of late, in a way it was effortless, but then this would happen, they broached the topic he had no idea how to approach, and he screwed up as always. Goddamn he sounded pathetic, whining that she only waited a month before going back to Steve. And it's not like he had spent every

waking minute of it with Will. They had seen each other in school, where everyone stared at him more than ever since he'd now gone from just "creepy pervert" to "creepy pervert who got a pityfuck from Nancy Wheeler AND whose little brother died and came back to life". But it's not like he'd had any idea of what to do anyway, without the feeling of everyone gawking and whispering. Sometimes when he had laid awake at night, wrestling with what his feelings for her actually were, and contemplating if she felt the same way as he did, he considered approaching her the next day. It's not like he had anything to lose, he'd tell himself at night. And then chicken out the next day.

In the morning they don't talk about it.

2. Stop retreating

It was an interesting sight, the wall in Murray Bauman's living room. Covered with all kinds of tangible pieces to a puzzle she found herself a part of. An outsider's eye on the chaos. Because boy, she hadn't realised what chaos it looked like from the outside. She immediately saw multiple glaring errors in his efforts to piece everything together.

"Your timeline's wrong," she informed him.

"I'm sorry?"

"Your timeline is wrong. And that girl with the buzzed hair, she's not Russian. She's from Hawkins Lab. Her name was Eleven."

"You may want to sit down for this."

"Last November my brother didn't go missing in the woods. He went into another dimension," Jonathan started before looking for Nancy to continue. She was better with words than him. She took a breath and just dove straight in.

"That girl escaped from the Department of Energy building on the edge of town the same night. She had been kept there since she was a baby and raised as part of a lab program exploring the possibilities of mind control. She was treated as a test subject, referred to as number Eleven. Their illegal experiments gave her telekinetic powers. Which they hoped would be useful in spying on the Russians. But instead she accidentally made contact with another dimension. A dark, evil dimension. And they forced her to make contact with the thing she found in it. Which made it aware of our world. It was a monster, some creature that doesn't exist in our world. A portal was opened in the lab between the dimensions and the monster came into ours."

Murray didn't show any reaction at all. He didn't laugh in disbelief or tell them to get out. So far, so good, she guessed.

"The Lab's in the woods close to our house. When Will biked home from the Wheeler's, he passed by as the monster escaped. It took Will

with it back to it's own dimension. Will managed to run and hide in its world," Jonathan started again.

"The next night Barb vanished," Nancy added.

"This other dimension, is it an exact parallel to ours?" Murray suddenly asked, tone serious.

"A dark parallel. It mirrors ours but is filled with death and decay," Nancy explained.

"They can intersect... in the radiowaves, through lights, sounds. Eleven came into contact with it through radio waves. Then my mom... she could hear Will's voice on the phone before the circuit blew. He could control the lights and turn on my record player from the other dimension. Mom learnt to communicate with him through the lights. He warned her as the monster was coming through the wall. I didn't believe her, I thought she was going crazy. The Lab made a fake body of Will. To cover up their mistakes. We had a funeral."

"My brother and his friends found Eleven the same night Barb disappeared, when they were searching for Will. My brother hid her in our basement."

"What exactly was she capable of?"

"She could use her mind to communicate through radio waves. She could move things with her mind. She could hurt people with it too, if she wanted to. Maybe more, I don't know what else. She recognised Will in a photo because she'd seen him in the Upside Down... uh, that's what we call the other dimension. She promised my brother that she'd help them bring him back."

"And this monster you speak of? Please elaborate."

Jonathan reached in to his inner pocket.

"This is a photo I took, just before Barb disappeared. It was so fast I didn't even see it."

Murray studied the photo closely.

"Why is it torn apart and taped back together?"

"Doesn't matter," Nancy deflected. "The next day I went back to where Barb disappeared and I saw it in the woods. It was right next to me but went by so quickly. But I was sure it wasn't anything I had ever seen before.

"We teamed up to hunt it down in the woods."

"I saw something on a tree trunk... It was a portal, I crawled through it and suddenly I was there. I was in the same place but in another dimension. Then I saw it. And it heard me. I ran and I ran."

"I could hear her screaming but I couldn't find her."

"I followed the sound of his voice until I found the portal again and Jonathan pulled me back."

She paused, glancing at Jonathan and collecting herself before continuing. She hated reliving her time in the Upside Down. The relief and comfort of his embrace as she came back into their world, however...

"So now we knew it could create temporary portals to our dimension. And that it had poor eyesight, good hearing and great sense of smell. It couldn't see me but heard me stepping on something. And it went after the smell of blood," Nancy explained. "It could detect it from... I don't know how far away. Far. Barb had cut her thumb that night. I wasn't bleeding which saved me. Will didn't either, that night, so that's why it didn't kill him."

"The next day we went to get more supplies to be able to kill it but uh, a misunderstanding kind of got me arrested," Jonathan looked embarrassed.

"It wasn't his fault," Nancy added.

"They found all our supplies in the trunk of my car and then Chief Hopper came in with my mom and had questions. They had been working together."

"He was on to the lab. He found out about Dr. Brenner's project,

Eleven and the portal in the lab, and all they did to cover it up, when he searched for Will," Nancy pointed at a part of the wall, "Oh and that was part of it, Hopper thinks Benny found Eleven first and called social services so the Lab had him killed and staged a suicide."

"The girl was still with your brother at this point?"

"Yes. But the Lab was on to them. Agents swarmed our house, but Mike and his friends managed to flee with her. Mike says she flipped a van in the air using her mind."

"They hid until we could contact them and bring them to my house."

"Eleven could contact Will and look for Barb if she was in a sensory deprivation tank, so we kind of built one, in the middle school gym" she took a breath before continuing. "She found Barb dead."

"But Will was still hiding from the monster."

"Hopper and Joyce went through the portal in the Lab to rescue Will. But they would just be killed aswell if we didn't do something so we went back to his house and drew the monster to us with blood, caught it in a bear trap and set it on fire."

"But it didn't die. And then it disappeared from us."

"Agents swarmed the middle school where my brother and his friends were with El. Eleven. They pointed guns at them and tried to take her away, but she killed them with her mind. The blood attracted the monster. It would have killed them but Eleven pinned it against the wall and disintegrated it until they both disappeared. She and the monster."

"The Chief and my mom rescued Will."

"And then the government covered everything up. And Barb's parents still don't know the truth, they still think she's alive. They still hope. It's not right, it can't go on like this. So we've brought proof."

She played the tape.

xxx

Murray was a bit of an enigma to her. He was hard to read and seemingly endlessly paradoxical. A complete cloudbuckoolander but at the same time right on point on certain things; casting a huge net to uncover conspiracies but at the same time able to zero in on details; willing to believe anything but also insisting on telling it as a more believable story to the public. She had never met anyone like him before, but at the same time felt like she could relate to him on some level. His work ethic, not stopping until he had all the answers, she could understand that. Whether it was a chemistry test or a monster from another dimension, she wouldn't stop until she at least had done everything in her power to know as much about it as she could. She liked to finish what she started.

She also found they worked surprisingly good as a team, the three of them. Of course she already knew that she and Jonathan worked well together, but they worked quickly as a trio as well. It hadn't taken them long at all to together build a more believable story to sell the general public on and now they had fallen into a rhythm as a weird line of production, Murray making copies of the tape, handing them to her to stuff in envelopes with their write-up before handing it down to Jonathan who sealed it and got the addresses.

"I know this is for the best," she began. "But I can't stop thinking about what the reaction would be if we just got the full story out there. What would be the most difficult for people to believe, the girl with telekinetic powers or the inter-dimensional monster?"

Jonathan just laughed and shook his head. It all sounded completely unbelievable. If he hadn't been there, he wouldn't have believed it in a million years.

"Funny thing is I think my parents would still find the fact that Mike was able to hide a girl in the basement for a week without them knowing the hardest thing to believe," she laughed. Jonathan half-smiled at her.

"Yeah. Parents are weird like that. I guess it should worry me that my mom seemed more surprised too see you with me at the police station than to see the load of weapons and fuel in my trunk," he laughed.

"Well, can't blame her, Byers. I still kind of think you were a weirder part of that day than the bear trap," she ribbed him and got a chuckle in response.

xxx

Trust issues? No he did not have trust issues, he told himself. Then fucking do something, another part of his brain said. Just for once in your goddamn life trust yourself and make a move. He thought she liked him the same way he liked her. Or frankly, more than liked. Well shit she had just about told him so herself. She had waited for him. She had *waited*. And now what Murray had said had obviously struck a chord with her as well, why else would she also be up in the middle of the night? He was sure of it. Now or never, if he can't do it now, he never will. Just do it.

He rose from the bed and opened the door.

Retreat? Did she retreat? She couldn't stop thinking about him. All they've said and done. And that he had just been out there in the living room, clearly not being able to let go of what Murray had said anymore than she could. It was as if she could have quite literally reached out and felt the tension with her hand as they had met in the middle, like the whole relationship between them was coming to an edge. And then they had backed away. She had physically and mentally retreated to the safety of the solitary room. Damn it, Murray was right. She hated how right he was, but she was even more tired of her own damn self. Take the plunge. Close a door to fully open the one she actually wanted to step through. Stop retreating.

She rose from the bed and opened the door.

He was there.

xxx

"So, that was..." he started as they laid entangled with each other afterwards. He still couldn't fully comprehend what had just happened. It felt like a dream but Nancy Wheeler felt very real in his arms right now.

"... amazing," she finished his sentence and looked up at him, giving him a quick peck on the lips before getting comfy on his shoulder.

"Yeah."

She'd felt things she'd never felt before. Jonathan's kisses had left her breathless and hungry for more. A desperate need to have him, all of him, had come over her, a fire burning inside her that didn't slow down until now. Now it was replaced by a different, intimate feeling. She'd never felt so close to anyone as she did right here, right now. And nothing had ever felt so good.

They laid in a comfortable silence for a few minutes, Jonathan absentmindedly stroking her hair.

She knew they would have to talk about their feelings for each other eventually but she didn't really know how to approach the subject.

"He may be a drunk but he's damn perceptive," she began, to keep it light.

"Yeah, that was pretty good," Jonathan laughed, making her smile.

"You do kind of have trust issues, y'know. But then again your dad really is an asshole."

"Yeah. And you do kind of retreat. But who wouldn't?"

"Yeah. But I'm done. With retreating," she said, with force. "It's like you said, nothing can go back to the way it was. And this is what I want."

"Yeah. And I may have issues but I trust you. And this. Really," he said and looked into her eyes. She believed him.

"Good," she started, keeping their eyes locked. "'cause I trust you. And I want to be with you."

"And I want to be with you."

She kissed him again before laying down on his shoulder. She fell asleep to the steady rhythm of his breathing and his hand stroking

her hair.

A/N: Thanks for all the reviews and follows and all! The next chapter will start with the morning after, but it will probably not be up 'til after the weekend, sorry.

3. Whether the world's ending or not

He fiddled with mixtapes before backing out of Murray's driveway, popping one out of the cassette player and putting a new one in.

"Finally," Nancy remarked without looking up from the map she was studying to remember the quickest way back out of town. He smiled to himself as the sounds of Blondie filled the car.

"Well I gave you the full Talking Heads experience on the way here so I thought it best to move on," he responded, earning him a smirk in return.

They drove in silence for a while, navigating their way through the dingy backstreets that seemed to completely surround Murray's place.

"Next right, is it?"

"Yeah."

As they pulled on to a larger road she turned to Jonathan.

"I meant everything I said last night."

"Me too."

"This whole year has been such... bullshit." She winced at the term Steve had repeated back to her, but it did describe it pretty accurately. "I've been bullshitting you... Steve... myself. When nothing you know, happened, after everything that went down, I wanted so badly for everything to go back to the way it had been before."

He hesitated before asking the question that had been burning in him.

"Why... why did you go back to Steve? I know, you said you waited but why did you go back?"

Her eyebrows narrowed.

"Why didn't you come to me?" She countered.

He looked backed at the road. She looked down.

"I was scared," they both answered the other at the same time.

She snorted with laughter and he did the same.

"Jesus, we're really pathetic," she laughed.

"Tell me about it."

She collected herself and continued.

"I was scared of being alone. And of becoming who I really am, and not who everyone thinks I am. It was easier to just fall back on Steve, even if it scared me that it would turn me into just another suburban girl. I couldn't take the loneliness."

He nodded.

"I was afraid that that week in november, that was gonna be it. And I was afraid of... talking to you about it, I mean, how I felt. I didn't know how you felt and didn't know how to ask you. You're actually hard to read. I don't know. I'm not good at that. Y'know, talking about stuff."

"Well, clearly we both suck at that," she cracked, lightening the mood. "But hey, now we know. That's what's important.."

She took his hand.

"From now we don't just hang out when the world's about to end. I know we've been in this like, bubble, out here, but when we get home, I'm with you. Whether the world's ending or not."

"Same."

"Good. And thank you."

"For what?"

"Coming with me. I know, you said to stop saying that you didn't

have to do it. But you really didn't, but you still did. And it meant the world. I couldn't have done it without you."

"You probably could've, but thanks for asking me. You know I..." He fumbled over his words, but he had to make sure she knew. "...I'm always behind you."

She gave his hand a squeeze.

"I know. Thank you."

They fell in to their natural rapport as they drove on for several hours, talking and laughing, savouring the rest of their time spent outside the bubble of Hawkins, but something kept gnawing at Jonathan.

"Your worried about Will?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sure he's fine, like you said, they're probably at the matinée," she took his hand again.

"Yeah, yeah, I guess... but he's not been himself. I don't think... I don't think the doctors can help with his... whatever it is, flashbacks, nightmares... and they're getting worse.

"You'll figure something out, you three, he's strong," she tried to comfort, squeezing his hand again. Jonathan nodded.

He pulled over at a service station to get gas a couple of miles later. Nancy went inside to get some food for them.

"They've got a phone in the back if you want to try again," she informed as she returned and pressed some coins into his palm.

The look on his face told her the answer when he came back but she still asked.

"No answer?"

"None."

"It's going to be okay."

He pressed the speed limits the rest of the way.

xxx

Whatever she expected them to find when they got inside his house, this wasn't it. Something had happened. Something huge, that was obvious, but as she wandered further inside to see more and more of the absurd crayon drawings on every surface, the terrible feeling of having no clue just what that was came over her. The rational part of her brain took over – was there anything here that could provide a hint of an explanation? A notepad laid on the table and she poured over it, but the paper was ripped out.

"I don't shoot polaroids."

"What?"

"This isn't mine," he explained, holding up an empty polaroid frame. "Someone else has been here."

She nodded. "We have to get to the lab."

xxx

"Nancy, wait." He grabbed her arm to stop her. He was well-aware of, and in awe of, her fearlessness, and therefore not at all surprised by the fact that her instinctive reaction to the unknown presence in the woods was to charge toward it, but maybe it wasn't the best strategy.

He could imagine a lot of different things coming out of the dark forest as he called out to whoever was there, but the one he most certainly did not expect was Steve Harrington.

x

She tried to keep her composure and process all the new information as the others continued talking over each other. A Demogorgon wasn't back in their world – Demogorgons. Plural. Exactly how many Steve and the kids wasn't sure about. But they were all heading to the lab. Where at least her brother, the Byers and probably Chief Hopper

were trapped.

"What do we do?" Steve was the one to pose the question after the front gate had finally opened. She weighed their options in her head. The power turning back on and then the gate functioning again must mean that someone inside had worked to get it going again. So there's people alive in there, on their way out. They could only hope it was their people.

"We have to go and get them."

Jonathan nodded and jumped in the driver seat as she got in on the passenger side.

"Wait here," she told the others before Jonathan sped away.

She rifled through her overnight bag which was still at her feet until she found what she was looking for at the bottom. She pulled out the gun. The one Jonathan had stolen from his piece of shit-father, the one she turned out be much better with than he, the one he never asked to have back after everything that went down last fall. She'd had it tucked away in a shoe box in her closet ever since, giving her some small comfort as she spent months waking in the middle of the night to nightmares of unimaginable horrors that she knew were all to real. She had it hidden in the inner pocket of her coat when they let themselves get arrested by the lab people, for a sense of security. It had been the first thing she'd packed in her bag for their trip, not knowing where it would take them. She already knew that it was ineffective against a Demogorgon, but damnit, better than nothing, right?

The horrible sound of the Demogorgons mixed with gunfire grew louder as they quickly approached the front entrance. She could see two smaller figures outside, one holding up the other. Mike and Will. Thank God. Through the glass entrance she could see Hopper half-leading, half-dragging Joyce out and she could hear her hysterical cries. Further in she could make out three Demogorgons tearing into a body, a sight that sent chills to her very core.

"Get in!" Jonathan shouted as he laid on the horn. Mike hurried over with Will on one side while Hopper shoved in Joyce from the other

before rushing to his truck.

"Pick up the others at the gate!" She managed to shout after him before they sped away. Jonathan floored it, putting as much distance between them and the horror of the lab as quickly as possible. In the backseat they could hear Joyce crying out Bob's name and that's when they understood. Even if she'd only met him once, to know that the friendly, innocent man was gone momentarily shook her. She could see Jonathan biting his cheek and quickly wiping at his right eye. They had to remain focused in spite of it all.

She turned around and eyed her brother who looked shocked. Jonathan blew through the gate as Steve and the kids jumped out of the way.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" She insisted, placing a hand on his arm. He swallowed hard.

"Physically yes."

She squeezed his hand. Her brother had seen way too many horrible things for a boy his age.

"What happened? What's wrong with Will?" She glanced at the unconscious boy slumped against her brother.

"The Shadow Monster, it got him."

"What?" Jonathan asked, looking at Mike in the mirror.

"His episodes... they weren't flashbacks or nightmares. He flashed into the Upside Down each time and the Shadow Monster... it's taken over his body."

She placed a hand Jonathan's arm as he blinked rapidly while speeding down the road towards his house. It was all she could think to do. They didn't deserve this, none of them did, but especially the Byers family, she thought. Sweet sweet Will who she was a hundred

percent certain never did or said a bad thing about anyone. Joyce who survived Lonnie Byers and then raised two beautiful boys all on her own. And Jonathan, sweet, kind, brave Jonathan who didn't care what people thought and who always put himself last and his family first.

She knew that they all might die tonight. And she damn sure wasn't ready for that so she would do anything to fight it.

A/N note: Thanks so much for all reviews, follows and favorites! Next chapter hopefully up tomorrow.

4. Like all was right with the world

She took a deep breath as the Shadow Monster or Mindflayer or whatever they would call it disappeared from view and it suddenly was quiet, in stark contrast to the chaos just moments ago. She replayed it all in her mind. Will's screams, Joyce's determination to get that thing out of her son, the desperation with which Jonathan clung to her as he couldn't bear seeing his brother in pain and how she felt like she'd do anything to relieve both brothers of it. Somehow she had the presence of mind to grab the fire poker which turned out to be the final push needed. It was weird, maybe just the adrenaline but she felt calm in a way, confident. Like she could see more clearly than ever before. Facing the end of the world as they knew it they hadn't backed down. She hadn't retreated. Perhaps it was true that in a life-threatening situation you come to know who you really are. She went back inside the cabin.

They were all hugging each other tight on the bed as she came in and it suddenly felt a bit awkward to be there. But then Jonathan looked up, a profound sense of relief evident in his eyes. She pulled out a chair and sat down and he reached out and took her hand again as Will leaned against his shoulder, looking exhausted but at the same time as relieved and happy as you could be when you've basically cheated death and an alternate dimension. Twice. She couldn't really fathom the strength of this little boy in front of her.

"Hi, Nancy," he said softly, his voice weak from all the screaming before.

"Hey Will," she smiled at him. "Sorry I had to do that to you." She glanced to his side where she had jammed the fire poker in him.

"Thank you for doing it."

"Sweetie, it was necessary. Thank you, thank you, thank you. You saved my boy," Joyce butted in softly and grasped her other hand for a second.

"Does it hurt?"

"Not really, just numb."

Joyce pulled up the hospital gown Will was still clad in slightly and inspected the burn. The poker had left a nasty darkred imprint, and the skin around it seemed to be turning different shades of red. She wondered how it would look in an hour.

"You sure you feel okay?" She asked her son.

"Just tired."

"Okay," she didn't quite believe him but how exhausted he looked made her mind up. "We'll go to the hospital in the morning."

They sat in silence for a while, just breathing, until the lights flashed. El.

"Let's go home," Joyce decided.

Jonathan carried Will to the car and they drove in a comfortable silence back to the house. His mind was completely blank and spinning at the same time, it felt like. Images of what had transpired in the cabin, snapshots of the chaos, played in his head. He hadn't been able to watch, he really thought that he would see his brother die. And he couldn't lose him, so he had loosened the ropes. And then he'd thought he would see the monster take his mother as well as the monster who possessed Will took a vice-like grip of her throat. And then... he glanced at Nancy beside him in the passenger seat, looking out the window. She had saved them. His brother, his mom, all of them. When he couldn't bear to watch she'd held him, anchoring him to this world when for him it felt like it was ending. When he couldn't help his mom she had grabbed the poker and made everything right. He took her hand. She looked at him and smiled softly.

xxx

The house they came back to was way too quiet. Nancy shut the door behind them as Jonathan put Will down on the sofa again to get rest while Joyce got out a first aid kit to bandage the burn.

"Where is everyone?" She asked even though she knew none of them

had the answer.

"Don't know," Jonathan took her hand, trying to ease her with touch when he knew he had no explanation that could calm her worry. She squeezed his hand, trying and failing to calm herself down with a reasonable explanation for her brother's whereabouts.

"I'm thirsty," Will's raspy voice suddenly sounded.

"I'll get him some water," Nancy volunteered, the small task giving her something else to do than standing there worrying.

She noted a smashed plate on the ground and some random groceries out on the counter as she filled the glass at the sink. That hadn't been there before, right? No. The sight of the food cued a growl from her stomach and she suddenly realised she and Jonathan hadn't eaten anything since the stop at the gas station in the early afternoon. Basic needs like that seemed to take a backseat when they faced off with monsters. She opened the fridge hoping to find something they could have right away. That's when her heart almost flew out of her body.

At the sound of her scream Jonathan flew up from where he was crouching next to Will while Joyce wrapped up his burn.

"Nancy?!" He yelled as he rushed to the kitchen. She was getting up off the floor and he helped her up while following her gaze to the refrigerator. Just at that moment the front door swung open.

"What happened?" Steve asked urgently, having heard the scream from outside. The kids all piled in behind him. So there they all were. Nancy swallowed hard as she caught her breath, holding on to Jonathan.

"Why is there a Demogorgon in the fridge?!" They yelled in unison.

Steve, Mike, Lucas and Max looked to Dustin. Steve nudged him forward as Joyce entered the room.

"There's a Demogorgon in my fridge?"

"Demodog, yes. I'm sorry, but, I can explain!" The curly-haired boy began. Nancy's raised eyebrows and questioning look urged him to

continue. "It's an important scientific discovery, we can't just bury it like some dog! We have to preserve the body."

"So you can do what? Show it to Mr. Clarke?" Lucas interjected.

"I don't know! Maybe!"

Nancy sighed. She couldn't believe Dustin sometimes, but she had to admit she understood him in a way. She'd worked to learn as much as she could about the Demogorgon last year but maybe now they could know more about it and the Upside Down. Yeah, Eleven had obviously succeeded in closing the gate, but did that mean the threat was over? She didn't believe that, a dark dimension existed, could they ever be truly safe from it?

"Jesus. Okay. We can't just show it to any-," she cut herself off as she really looked over the kids and Steve. "Wait. Where were you? What happened to your face?"

"Oh, right," Dustin began again. Steve opened his mouth but Dustin cut him off. "No dude, it's alright I've got this."

"So uh, after you all left, Mike here raised a very good point – how would the Chief and El get through an army of Demodogs to get to the Gate? So we devised a plan-"

"I did," her brother interjected.

"Okay fine, Mike came up with a plan to go in to the tunnels and torch it here," he pointed to the drawings on the floor. "to get the Mindflayer to send his troops this way and draw attention away from the Gate."

"Sort of like you guys did last year," her brother added.

She had told him about how they had drawn the Demogorgon to them and tried to kill it as Hopper and Joyce entered the Upside Down to retrieve Will. She nodded. She wasn't mad at them for leaving anymore since they had a good reason, instead cursing herself for not thinking of that earlier. There was a flaw in their original plan. They shouldn't make such mistakes. She shouldn't.

"Okay. And it worked?"

"Yeah!"

"And you're okay?" She looked at her brother specifically.

"Yes."

"Sure?"

"Yes!"

"Alright. Then what the hell happened to your face?"

"Uh..." Steve hesitated and Dustin once again cut him off.

"I've got you, no worries. So, first of all, Steve, very responsibly, was adamant about making good on his promise to you to keep us safe and not going in there. But, then Max's brother Billy suddenly showed up looking for her. He was really angry and attacked Lucas so naturally Steve valiantly fought him off."

Steve looked exasperated.

"You did! At least you got him off Lucas. I told you, you put up a good fight! Got in some good punches there in the beginning, then it took a turn I know, when he smashed you over the head with the plate and got like maybe nine, ten punches in your face and knocked you unconscious but you know, you did good! Anyway, Max took the needle we used on Will earlier and knocked Billy out. So we loaded up on gear and took Billy's car to set the plan in motion while Steve couldn't stop us."

"Wait, who was driving?"

"Max."

"What?!"

"I'm the Zoomer," the tomboyish girl that she barely knew, added.

"We almost died like, five times," Mike interjected.

"Well we didn't, so, there."

"Whatever. Hey, where's Will? Is he alright?"

"Yeah, he's fine, he's in here." Joyce answered as she took the long forgotten glass of water from the counter and returned to the living room, apparently choosing to ignore the Demodog in her fridge and general destruction of her home. For now her focus was solely on her youngest son. Nancy admired Joyce. She knew people in town thought that Joyce Byers was at least a frazzled scatterbrain or at most a hysterical woman on the edges of sanity, but Nancy had seen firsthand her levelheadedness in times of crisis and her persistence. She'd always been right about Will, and would do anything for him. Her heart ached for her when she thought about what happened to Bob.

They all followed Joyce into the living room.

"Hey. Are you okay?" Nancy asked Steve as the boys all rushed to Will.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Sure?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks for everything. Really."

He nodded and followed the boys. She hung back, knowing her brother and his friends were safe she could relax. She turned around and walked out for some air, they would be in there for a while she thought as she heard Will ask "Wait, so what's Steve doing here?" And all the boys talking over each other.

She took a seat on the front porch, gazing up at the night sky, recalling the view of the Shadow Monster disappearing up into it. She heard the door open behind her and knew who it was without turning around. Jonathan sat down next to her. She took his hand and leaned into his side.

"What a night," she said.

"What a week," he countered. She grinned and he smiled.

"The craziest part is that on Monday we got to pretend like everything's normal. No one in town knows how close they all came to oblivion."

"Yeah."

"I wonder when the papers will have our story out."

"I just hope it works."

"It will. It has to."

"Yeah."

She leaned in and kissed him. It was short and sweet and made him feel like all was right with the world even though he knew it wasn't.

"You ready to be seen out in public with the Freak?" He asked, thinking about the absurdity of going to school on Monday after fighting monsters over the weekend. He was half-joking but she detected a hint of real anxiety behind it.

"Jonathan. After everything I really, really don't care what anyone thinks."

"Me neither."

"Good. Because I'm done with retreating and hiding who I am and want to be. And who I want to be with." She looked at him, determined.

"You're brave. And smart. And funny and sweet. And tough and beautiful. He looked at her sincerely. "Your taste in music is not completely terrible, and you're an excellent shot." He added with a smirk.

"Thanks. And you are brave. And smart. And funny and sweet. And a good brother, like really-really good. Your music taste is a bit pretentious and you've got terrible aim with a gun but somehow great with a camera." She smirked.

She felt her heartbeat speed up as she went for it.

"I love you," she said with more emphasis and weight on it than anything else she'd ever said, because she'd never been so sure of something.

"I love you too."

He kissed her deeply and she kissed him back. It was different from their first kiss(es), which had been so passionately desperate as dams had burst inside of them both. This was a different form of passion, slow and deliberate. She wanted it to last forever.

They didn't pull away from each other until they felt headlights come over them as Hopper's truck came to a stop a few feet away. They stood up as Hopper and an exhausted-looking El exited.

"Hey lovebirds, I take it everyone's okay if you're out here sucking face?" Hopper said with a hint of humour behind his usual gruff voice. El just smiled. Nancy felt her cheeks flush and looked down while Jonathan answered.

"Uh, yeah, everyone's fine. You two?"

"Good. Good. But she needs rest."

"You closed the gate," Nancy said as she stepped toward El, more of a statement than a question.

"Yes."

She hugged the younger girl who she was so glad to see again. For El's sake, for Mike's, for the world at large.

"You're amazing, you know that right?" El first looked hesitant as she pulled away, seemed to think about it for a second and then nodded seriously which made Nancy grin. El smiled.

El and Hopper went inside. Nancy took Jonathan's hand and followed.

5. Don't want it to end

Will was out like a light in his room and Eleven went to sleep in Joyce's room after a quick reunion with Mike and the others. Eventually Joyce decided that it was best if everyone just stayed the night. She wouldn't leave Will's side tonight and Hopper went to Joyce's room, having the same attitude towards Eleven. Nancy helped Jonathan get extra mattresses and sleeping bags from a closet and deposited them on the living room floor. Steve had already claimed the couch.

"Hey, why do you get the the couch?" Max protested.

"Because your brother bashed my head in."

Max huffed but had no further protest and then took a sleeping bag and laid down close to Lucas while Mike and Dustin spread themselves out in the room.

"And no funny business, alright?" Steve remarked.

"What's funny business?"

"God you're not my mom."

The kids continued to bicker with Steve so Nancy and Jonathan took the opportunity to retreat to his bedroom.

For the second night in a row they lay back on the pillows drenched in sweat. She much preferred the reason for the sweat the previous night, she thought as she adjusted herself into the comfiest spot on his shoulder and the sound of his breathing lulled her to sleep again.

She awoke the next morning of the light streaming in through the window and the motions of the bed as Jonathan sat on the edge of it, getting dressed.

"Sorry, didn't mean to wake you."

"No it's alright. What time is it?" She asked but looked at the digital clock on his nightstand. 08:07. They hadn't slept for long but she felt

wide awake. It was quiet so she guessed the others were still sleeping. She followed him out of the room.

Well, she'd guessed wrong because in the hallway they almost tripped over her little brother who sat against the wall watching the door behind which El was sleeping.

"Mike," she whispered. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," he deflected quickly.

He looked from Nancy to Jonathan and back.

"About time," he huffed.

"Shut up."

Jonathan quickly washed before going to the kitchen so start on breakfast for everyone while she took a shower. She changed into the clothes she had in her bag and pulled her hair up in a messy ponytail before venturing out in the hallway again. Looking exasperated at Mike, who was still sitting there, she glanced at the clock on the wall and then resolved to bang on the bedroom door before rejoining Jonathan in the kitchen. She could hear Hopper clambering out of the bedroom and cursing under his breath as he almost walked right on top of Mike.

"What are you even making? Dustin threw out all the food," she asked as she came up behind Jonathan at the stove and hugged him.

"Well he left the eggs and milk we had in the door at least. Don't worry, I did the sniff test, I think it's alright despite, y'know."

"The otherwordly being next to it? Let's hope, I'm starving."

Hopper's sounds seemed to awaken the rest of the house, and one by one they all joined them in the kitchen, Dustin rushing in first at the smell of food, followed by his fellow living room guests that he'd basically trampled over on course for the kitchen. Mike and El followed, with Hopper behind muttering about needing to get to the station, and lastly Joyce helping a still frail Will to the table.

"How you feeling buddy?" Jonathan asked as he served his brother first.

"Okay."

They ate breakfast together like one big weird family.

"Okay," Joyce started. "Will, after breakfast I'm taking you to the hospital."

Will nodded.

"I'll come with you," Jonathan said.

"Me too," Nancy added.

"I have to get to the station and damage control this whole thing," Hopper started, thinking as he looked over to Eleven. "You'll stay here until I come back. Got it? Stay. Here."

"Yes," El rolled her eyes.

"Got it Wheeler? No funny little adventures, stay in, alright?" He nailed Mike with a look.

"Yessir."

"I will not let them out of the house Chief," Steve assured Hopper, who looked skeptical. "I will tie you to the house if necessary," Steve warned the kids.

"But I want that thing out of my fridge by the time I get back," Joyce piped in, looking at Dustin and Steve.

"Sure thing Mrs Byers," Dustin answered and immediately started brainstorming ideas of what to do with it.

"Just take it out to the shed til I get back, I'll handle it," Hopper decreed, shooting down Dustin's ideas that ranged from taking it to his storm cellar to throwing it back over the fence to Hawkins Lab.

xxx

They sat in the waiting room, Jonathan filling out forms while Joyce went with Will as he was examined. She nudged him.

"Hey, I've been thinking," she started, lowering her voice she continued. "Should we tell Murray about last night?"

"I don't know, he seemed pretty sure that what we sent out will be enough. Plus he didn't want us to contact him again."

"Yeah I know, I think so too but... even if our story nails them, they're still going to explain away Bob's death. They're going to say he was killed by a bear or something. They should have to answer for that too. And pay for it."

"I know... God we're going to have to plan a funeral again. Okay, let's see how it goes when they run our story. Then we can maybe come out with more later. For Bob."

She nodded in agreement.

"I'm worried about my mom," he confessed. She put a hand on his knee.

"I know. Me too. Just be there for her. She's strong."

Joyce and Will returned, both looking and walking somewhat lighter.

"What did they say?"

"It's good, no infection or anything. But we've got to watch it for a while. And he's going to get a scar," Joyce explained. Will shrugged.

"That's okay. You know, girls like scars," Nancy joked, trying to lighten the mood.

"Tell me about it," Jonathan added. She elbowed him in the ribs but was glad to see Will laughing a bit.

When they returned El was resting on the couch, Mike sitting beside her and talking quietly. She made room for Will at the other end of the couch. Steve, Dustin, Lucas and Max were cleaning up in the kitchen. She had seen a lot of weird stuff this weekend but seeing

Steve ordering the trio of 14 year olds around with a kitchen towel tossed over his shoulder was almost the weirdest of them all.

"Thanks for cleaning you guys. Did you...?" Joyce prodded.

"Yep, the Demodog has been relocated to the shed until further notice," Dustin answered.

"Good," Joyce continued on into the living room. "How are you feeling?" She asked Eleven as she knelt down.

"Hungry," the girl stated, straight-forward as ever.

"Yeah, it's almost lunch time. But we don't have anything at home right now," Joyce answered. Jonathan shot Dustin a look. "Honey could you two go out and get pizza for everyone?" Joyce looked to Jonathan and Nancy.

"Sure mom."

"Maybe I should get going," Steve suddenly said.

"No!" Dustin immediately protested.

"Yeah, why?" Max agreed.

Steve hesitated and glanced at Nancy standing beside Jonathan.

"No, you should stay," she started. "But... look can we just talk real quick? Out there." Steve nodded and followed Nancy and Jonathan out while the middle schoolers collectively rolled their eyes.

Jonathan went to wait in the car while she turned to Steve out on the porch.

"Look, I'm sorry. About the party and everything. You didn't deserve that."

He nodded.

"I just... I couldn't pretend anymore that everything was normal. I get that you wanted everything to be but I... can't. I was just lying to

myself. And it wasn't fair to you, this past year. I'm sorry about that. I'm sorry, I was just... it was a really difficult, horrible year. And it was easier to hide from myself, my feelings, than to deal with them. But it wasn't fair to you."

"It's okay, Nancy. Really. I get it. It wasn't meant to be. You two belong together."

She nodded, feeling another weight being lifted off her shoulders. "You were wrong last night though. You're not a shitty boyfriend, you were a really good boyfriend but it just wasn't..."

He chuckled lightly. "Eh, not perfect. A good boyfriend doesn't ditch his drunk girlfriend at a party, regardless of what she's said."

"I'll give you that one. Look, I get it if you don't want to see me, if it's too weird or whatever. But I want to be your friend, if you're okay with that. I do care about you. We all do. I still don't fully get how it came to be, but those kids in there worship you."

"Yeah. I- I want us to be friends too. It's still weird but, hey, I'll manage."

"So will you stay, today?"

"Yeah."

"Good," she smiled. "Pepperoni, right?"

"What?"

"On pizza, you want pepperoni?"

"Oh, yeah," he smiled.

"I would like pepperoni too!" Dustin's voice suddenly shouted, causing them both to turn around and see three heads ducking away from the window and one at the door slightly ajar.

"Hey! Dipshits, some goddamn privacy please!" Steve turned inside. She chuckled as she turned and walked to Jonathan's car.

"All good?" He asked as she sat down.

"Yeah, all good."

"He's staying?"

"Yeah."

"Good."

xxx

She made a point of taking his hand as they walked into Paolo's. After ordering they sat down and waited. A voice she knew all too well sounded out. Just their luck, she thought.

"Well well well," Carol began as she sauntered over with Tommy H. in tow, both wearing their most self-satisfied grins. "Look at this, the Slutty Princess and the Pervert resurface! One can only wonder what you two have been up to all week."

"Go away, Carol," Nancy bit off.

"Oh, come on now, I'm just curious, Princess. I mean, I get that the appeal of King Steve wears off with time, especially since he's lost his throne but I don't get why you're hung up on the Pervert. I thought with your tendencies you'd have made your way around the whole school by now, really."

"Maybe she just has a thing for perverts?" Tommy added.

"Hm, does that make her more of a pervert than the Pervert, even?" Carol posed, pretending like she'd put forth a big philosophical conundrum.

"Shut. Up." Jonathan clenched his fists. He didn't give a damn what they said about him. But a whole lot of what they said about Nancy.

"Make me," Tommy dared and stepped forward. Jonathan got up from his seat and got in his face, staring down the smug boy.

"Order up!" The ding of the bell and Paolo's voice broke the tension. Nancy quickly got out some money and payed, grabbing the pizza boxes with one hand and Jonathan with the other, feeling Carol's and

Tommy's eyes glued to them as they left.

"I don't care what they say," Nancy stated on the drive back to his house.

"I don't either," he answered. She looked at him and raised an eyebrow. "I don't care what they say about me," he elaborated.

"Me neither."

"But I kind of do care what they say about you."

"And I kind of care what they say about you."

"So can we make a pact?" She suggested after a beat.

"What?"

"Promise to just ignore them. Not give them or anyone else the satisfaction."

"Fine."

"Promise?"

"Yes! Do you?"

"Yes!"

They quickly forgot about Carol and Tommy when they got back to his house. They all gathered in the living room for the weirdest pizza party ever. Will didn't have much of an appetite but got two slices down after Joyce insisted. Eleven on the other hand ate with a ferocious appetite.

"Mike," Nancy began, suddenly realizing something. "When was the last time you were home?"

"Oh," he thought for a moment. "Uh, like three days ago? I think."

"Hm. I guess it should bother us that mom's not bugged by it," she remarked, biting into another slice.

He shrugged, looked pensive for a moment and then asked: "Wait, so where have you been?"

At this Joyce, who for the most sat quietly next to Will, seemingly content on letting the presence of the others take her mind off things, suddenly jolted.

"Jonathan! Where were you? Oh god I totally forgot, it was just so crazy with Will and- you didn't run into any trouble did you? I'm so sorry, I-"

"Mom, don't worry, you were with Will! I tried calling but it's okay. I can take care of myself."

"I know you can, I'm just sorry I didn't even think of it."

"So where were you?" Mike repeated. "I know you weren't at Stacy's for some girls night or whatever you told mom."

Nancy looked to Jonathan, who just shrugged.

"We were away destroying the lab."

At first, everyone just stared at her. Then the questions rained on them, everyone talking over each other.

"What?"

"How?"

"When?"

"What do you mean?"

She sighed and looked to Jonathan. In sync, she went to her coat and got a tape out of the pocket while Jonathan got his cassette player. They played them the recording.

"How did you get that?" Joyce asked.

"We made it."

"But how?"

"We got them to take us into the lab, Dr. Owens talked to us, trying to keep us quiet. I had the tape recorder hidden in my purse."

"You went in there willingly? Why?" Steve looked worried. She appreciated it, but that he posed that question made glaringly obvious for her a key difference between Steve and Jonathan and why the latter was the one for her.

"To get justice for Barb. To make them pay for everything they've done. To Will, to El," she looked at the two who sat quiet but listened with intent.

"Did you just roll up to the building and asked them to let you in or what?" Lucas asked.

"No, they spy on the whole town, remember? I just made a phone call to Mrs. Holland that would make them suspicious. We set up a meeting in the park and let them ambush us. They left us in an interrogation room for hours, then Dr. Owens showed us the portal to the Upside Down and said everything you heard. Then he let us go."

"That is so badass. Super stealthy!" Dustin's impressed reaction made her smile.

"Then what happened?" Max asked.

"Barb's parents had hired this investigative journalist out of Illinois, to look for her. So the next day we drove out to see him, when I said I was going to be at Stacy's. He was doing his own investigation into everything. We played him the tape and told him everything."

"But... no one's going to believe it," Lucas interjected.

"Well, he did. But yeah, no one else would, so we decided to moderate it, to make it believable. We came up with a story that Barb was killed by illegal experimental chemicals leaked from the lab and that they covered it up. People can believe that, with the recording. We've already sent it out to the press."

"We just got back here last night," Jonathan added.

"So that's where you were," Steve stated. She nodded.

"Wow you guys skipped a lot of school," Dustin pointed out.

"That's your take away from this?" Jonathan countered.

"I'm so proud of you," Joyce interrupted.

Eleven looked to be deep in thought. "This is... bad for the bad men?" She eventually asked.

"Yes. It's bad for the bad men. They wanted to keep all the bad things they did a secret, you know? Now it's not a secret anymore so they will be in trouble. We couldn't tell people everything, but we told people enough so that everyone is going to be really really mad at them, because it's a really big secret," Nancy explained, trying to find the right level of which to speak to Eleven.

"Good," El nodded seriously.

"So, that was all you did when you were gone?" Mike looked at Nancy with a shit-eating grin on his face.

"Yep, that was pretty much it," Jonathan got out, blushing in unison with Nancy who simultaneously tried to kill her little brother with a look.

A pounding on the door jolted them all. Jonathan, Nancy and Steve all flew up from their seats. Who the hell could that be? They knew it wasn't Hopper because they would have heard his truck. Given what they had just talked about, everyone was even more on edge. Steve immediately reached for the spiked bat and Nancy for her gun as soon as they were standing. They pounding continued.

"Stay here," Jonathan instructed the kids before walking towards the door.

"Wait, take this," Steve said and tossed him a switchblade Hopper had left behind. He caught it and concealed it in his hand as he turned back to the door, Nancy and Steve close behind, both hiding their weapons behind their backs.

It took Jonathan a second to recognize the figure who stood on his porch as he opened the door. He had seen Billy around in school, the

limited time he'd actually spent there this week, and at the party on Halloween night, but of course not talked to him. He wasn't hard to read though: loud, obnoxious, the type of guy who tried to take up as much space in a room as he could. Remembering the kids tale of what happened when they were gone last night, he eyed him with caution, ready to force him away.

"Byers, right?" The taller boy greeted, trying to look nonchalant.

Jonathan nodded. Billy looked past him, first spying Nancy.

"Wheeler," he nodded. "Say hi to your mom for me," he winked.

"What?"

"Harrington!" He spotted him just as Steve had passed off the spiked bat to Dustin who'd snuck up behind him, who in turn passed it to Max behind him.

"What do you want, Billy?" Steve sighed.

"I think you know Harrington."

Billy and Steve stared each other down. Nancy looked to Jonathan. Had the guy seriously come back to continue fighting? For a second she weighed in her head the pros and cons of pulling a gun on Billy just to get rid of him.

"My car keys."

"Oh," Steve dug in his pocket. "Here."

Billy caught them in the air and smiled that smug grin at him. Jonathan tried to close the door on him but Billy had wedged himself into the gap, preventing it.

"Hang on. I don't know what the fuck happened here last night, but don't think I'll forget it, Harrington. Anyway, I guess it's sweet of you to babysit for your ex while she's off fucking her new guy, but I'll take my bitch of a sister with me now, dad wants her home."

"Go away Billy," Max stepped forward and stared her brother down

with a menacing look, bat in hand. "Remember?" She raised the bat.

Billy looked flustered.

"I'll take her home later," Steve narrowed his eyes before continuing. "And I would listen to her. Because if you ever lay a hand on her or any of her friends again, you will end up in the ICU." Billy looked back at four pairs of eyes that all looked very serious about personally making good on the threat Steve had uttered. Steve, Max, Jonathan and Nancy all stared him down until Billy backed away and went to his car.

Eventually Hopper returned and took Eleven home, after finally prying her away from Mike. Steve took Dustin, Lucas and Max home soon after and then Jonathan drove the Wheeler siblings back to Maple Street.

"I know we've just spent every minute together for like the better part of a week but I still don't want it to end" she said as Jonathan pulled up to the curb, ignoring Mike's groan in the back seat. Her little brother exited the car but waited outside.

"I know, me too. Pick you up here tomorrow?" He smiled that half-smile.

"Yeah. Love you."

"Love you too."

She gave him a quick kiss before exiting the car. He waited until both Wheelers were safely inside the door before driving off.

A/N: OK, enjoy this long chapter while I figure out the next chapter(s) covering the month between this and the Snow Ball! As always, thanks for all the reviews, favorites and follows!

6. It's new, it's good

He sprang up from his bed as soon as he woke, his internal clock apparently beating the alarm clock on his bedside table to its task. It was early so he walked quietly out of his room and carefully opened the door to Will's room to peak inside. His little brother was sound asleep, his light snores calming Jonathan. He was on his way to his mother's room to check on her when a sound from the kitchen interrupted him. He changed his course and found her smoking at the table.

"Morning sweetie," she greeted softly.

"Mom, have you slept at all?" He asked, concerned.

"A little bit. It's alright. Will's been sleeping, that's the important part."

"Yeah but..."

"It's okay, I'm staying home with him today, I'll try and get some rest during the day."

"I can stay home too, I just have to call Nancy and..."

"No sweetie, you're going to school. We have to get back to normal."

"You sure? I'm worried about you."

"I know, I'm sure."

He nodded and took a deep breath. He was worried about upsetting her, but he had to acknowledge it.

"I'm sorry. About Bob."

She just nodded, looking down briefly.

"He was a good guy, I'm sorry I wasn't more... welcoming."

"It's alright. He understood. He liked you anyway."

He nodded and mumbled sorry again for reasons he wasn't sure.

"So, you and Nancy," his mother started, changing the subject. "you are...?" She prodded.

He blushed.

"Yeah it's... new... it's good."

She reached out and put a hand on his.

"I'm happy for you two. You're good for each other."

He nodded, looking down at the table.

"She knows she's welcome here anytime right?"

Another nod.

"Anytime. In fact you must invite her over for dinner when we've got the house back in order, like a proper dinner. I mean she saved Will and oh thank her again for me would you? It'll never be enough but-

"Yeah, yeah, I'll tell her." Glancing at the clock on the wall he continued. "I should hurry up and make breakfast, I'm picking her up before school."

"Oh nonsense I'll make you breakfast, go and shower."

He obeyed his mother.

xxx

"... and so then Molly came over and was crying because Alex had just dumped her and she didn't want to be alone so we all stayed and got some ice cream and just kept it going, I couldn't leave. I'm sorry I forgot to call a second time," she finished off her big lie to her mother over breakfast explaining her whereabouts.

"Well I suppose it's alright since it was-" Her mother started.

"Hey, Jonathan's here," Mike came into the kitchen and informed them casually, ruining everything.

"Jonathan? What happened to Steve?" Her mother asked, confused.

"Uh... we broke up sorry got to go!" She got out in a rush and quickly got up, dumping her dishes in the sink and running to the hall, getting her coat and bag before rushing out the door despite her mother's protests.

She half-jogged to his car, smiling at him as she got in.

"Go!" She urged him but couldn't keep a straight face.

"What?" He laughed as he stepped on the gas.

"Goddamn Mike, I'd just sold my mom on a perfect lie when he came in and ruined it by saying that you were here! Like I didn't know, that's why I was wrapping it up."

"You don't want them to know about us?"

"Yes I do, I was going to tell them, just not over breakfast when I was telling her I was at Stacy's all weekend!"

"Got it."

"But now she knows Steve and I broke up and you and I are together. God she's going to cross-examine me when I get home. Can I just stay with you?"

He chuckled. "Maybe, apparently you're welcome anytime."

"Good to know."

"Yeah, my mom's crazy about you. She wanted me to thank you again, for everything. And she wants you to come over for dinner when it's all calmed down."

"I'd like that. How is she? How's Will?"

"I don't know... Will was sleeping, that's good. Mom not so much. She's staying home with him. But I'm worried about how she's dealing with everything, with Bob."

"Yeah... just be there for her. And let me know if you guys need help with anything. Seriously, anything."

"Yeah, I know. I almost stayed home today, I was going to call you and let you know. But she insisted I go."

She nodded, understanding. Then suddenly looked up as she realised something.

"Well you couldn't have."

"What?"

"Called me."

"Why not?"

"I ripped your phone off the wall."

"Oh, right. I completely forgot about that."

"Me too."

They burst out laughing, clearing his mind of worries at least temporarily.

He parked the car at the edge of the school's parking lot as always, trying to be as far away from other people as possible.

"You ready for this? It's gonna be..." He turned to her.

"Yeah, I'm ready." She leaned over and kissed him.

Grabbing their bags they exited the car and walked hand in hand into the school.

"They're not subtle," she remarked as it seemed like everyone they passed stared at them, and whispers followed them around.

"No they are not," he agreed.

For him it had always been one or the other, either he felt like everyone stared at him or he was invisible. He much preferred the

latter. Or well, that one person looked at him was enough, he thought as they passed the notice board by the entrance. A year ago he had put up Will's missing-flyer there. Everyone had stared at him but she was the only person who really looked. And the only person to speak to him. It took him by surprise. He didn't think back then that he needed it, someone to speak to. But now he knew he needed her. Nancy, Will and mom. As long as he had them he'd gladly be invisible to everyone else.

'CHEATING SLUT' in red ink greeted them at Nancy's locker.

"They really need some new material," she shrugged it off with and got her books out.

"Yep," Jonathan agreed as he closed his locker that was five lockers down from hers. The same red ink was present on his, where it had been used to fill in the old marking 'CREEP' that had been carved into his locker since freshman year.

"Hey Stacy," she greeted as the girl she had used as a cover opened her locker next to Nancy's. The other girl just rolled her eyes and turned away.

"Nice to see you too," she muttered as Stacy left. It's not like she cared anyway. Stacy had been... well, people would see it as a friend. But really for Nancy she'd just been one of the girls in the clique she'd gained entry to as Steve's girlfriend. She'd been alright to sit with at lunch if Steve wasn't there for some reason. Alright to make banal chitchat with in the hallways. But she couldn't really see her as a friend, not a true friend. True friends were rare, she thought as she glanced at Barb's old locker on the other side of hers. She looked up at Jonathan. Yeah, he was rare, too.

They had US History together to start the day and were among the last one's into the room. They got their seats next to each other towards the back.

"Ms. Wheeler, Mr. Byers, nice of you to join us again," Mr. Gleason noted dryly. She cursed the dreary old man under her breath and wished the floor would open up beneath and swallow them down as everyone looked at them and the whispers started again. She tried to

shut them out and focus on the class.

They were out of there as soon as Gleason allowed.

"I'm gonna go to the bathroom," she announces as they walk down the hallway. He nods and resolves to wait outside.

She's barely sat down inside the stall before she hears voices outside.

"Can you believe her?"

"I know, right! I mean after Tina's party I guess you shouldn't be surprised."

"Yeah, but still. Like she doesn't even try to hide it now."

"Yeah, and did you see Steve's face?"

"My god, yes! Do you think it was Jonathan?"

"Of course, wouldn't be the first time. She gets off on it, them fighting for her."

"I just don't get the appeal of Jonathan, he's such a freak."

"Or what Steve saw in her in the first place. He could do so much better."

"Hello," she interrupts them casually as she goes to wash her hands. Courtney and Jessica clamps up and look away embarrassed.

She exits out into the hallway again and finds Steve talking with Jonathan. They must both be aware of the fact that everyone else in the hallway are watching the interaction. With even more interest now as she joins them.

"Hey," Steve greets her, only slightly awkwardly.

"Hi," she answers as she settles in to Jonathan's side. "You sure you feel okay?" She questions and gestures vaguely at his face.

"Yeah yeah, it's fine." He turns to Jonathan again. "So anyway, how's your brother?"

"Good, he's resting. Probably be home from school for a bit. Mom's at home with him."

"Good, that's good."

"Yeah."

"Well, I gotta get to class. I'll see you around."

They don't share anymore classes before lunch. By the time they meet up on the hood of his car Nancy's gotten propositioned by three different sleazebags gleefully mentioning motel rooms. Meanwhile Jonathan's been asked how it feels being a pityfuck two times and has tried to scribble over Nancy's phone number that's written in marker on the wall by the urinal in the second floor bathroom.

"You alright?" He prods before biting into his sandwich.

"Yeah, screw them. Just glad that we're together after lunch. It's easier then, at least they don't dare say anything to directly to me when you're around. They're afraid since everyone thinks you beat up Steve again."

"Yeah," he feels anger flare up inside again. He hates what she has to endure. But he tries to focus on her words, their pact. Just ignore them.

As if she can read his mind, she puts a hand on top of his and reminds him.

"It's okay. I don't care. Don't give them the satisfaction, right?"

"Right."

"They must be so confused now," she giggles slightly. "That we're not fighting with Steve. Must be throwing everyone for a loop."

"Yeah."

They manage to get through the rest of the afternoon with just a couple of comments from Carol and Tommy, and Billy, who seem intent on provoking them. They can finally relax as he drives her

home.

"Not looking forward to dinner..." she mutters as he pulls up outside the Wheeler residence.

"Do you want me to come in and talk with your mom?" He offers.

"No, you should get home. I'll see you tomorrow," she kisses him goodbye.

xxx

She knows her mother so she's not surprised by the initial silent treatment as she gets home. Her mother thinks that it makes her stew before she's going to launch into her at dinner. Fine by her, she thinks, as it gives her time to catch up on some of the schoolwork she's ignored.

"So young lady," her mother then begins at dinner, putting a plate down with force in front of her. "I want an explanation. Where were you this weekend?"

"With Jonathan," she confesses.

"How could you do this? Lie to us and sneak off with a boy doing god knows what all weekend?"

"Mom it wasn't like that."

"Oh really? I don't know what's worse, whatever you two did all weekend or that you lied. What on earth gave you the idea that-"

"Mom it-"

"Don't interrupt me!"

"Hey, listen to your mother. No daughter of mine is sneaking off with some boy like that," her father suddenly weighed in. That he cared enough to actually say something must mean that they were really angry, she thought.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I lied but it wasn't... it wasn't like whatever you

think it was."

"Oh then please enlighten me."

"Jonathan was helping me out with something... with Barb."

"What about Barb?"

"Just... helping me deal with it, okay?"

"Are you still on that? It's been a year, and you have other friends, surely," her father's words, and how casually he delivered them, made her tighten her grip on her knife and fork until her knuckles whitened, trying to stay calm.

"Ted please," her mother objected to her father's insensitivity.

"What?" He asked, clueless as ever.

"But then Will got sick. Like, really sick," she pressed on. "So I helped deal with that. Right, Mike? You were there too."

She kicked her brother under the table, enlisting his help since he'd screwed her over this morning.

"Oh, yeah, yeah! Will was really bad."

"Well is he okay?" Their mother asked, concerned.

"He's okay now."

"Oh my. Was it to do with last fall?"

"Yeah, some long term effects, they said."

"Oh well I should call Joyce and see if she needs any help."

"I've already offered," Nancy answered.

"Well, still. So this is where you were all weekend?"

"Yes, I couldn't leave Jonathan."

"Well I suppose it's alright, but I still don't understand why you lied?"

"Uh, well they didn't want people to know, nothing personal, they're pretty private, you know?"

"Hm."

"But I'm sure she'd appreciate the call."

"Mhm. But still, you and Jonathan... you're an item now?"

"Uh, yes."

"What happened with Steve?"

"Nothing, just... we weren't right for each other. We're still friends."

"Okay. Well you must invite Jonathan over for dinner soon."

"Uh yeah, I'll ask him."

xxx

After dinner she returns to her room to continue with her homework, settling on her bed with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* she reads for her English class. There's a knock on her open door. She looks up and it's Mike standing in the doorway. She motions for him to come inside.

"No need to thank me," he begins with a sly grin on his face.

"You owed me, you totally screwed me this morning. I had her hook, line and sinker."

"Excuse me Pinocchio," he continued teasing as he sat down next to her on the bed. "What are you reading?"

She held up the front cover towards him.

"Relatable?"

She chuckled at that.

"That whole 'from now on we tell each other everything' didn't really

work out, did it?" He continued.

"Kind of right off the bat," she remarked.

"Yeah... I like El," he confessed.

"Wow really Mike? Guess what, I like Jonathan."

"Shut up, just wanted to say it out loud."

"How was it? To see her again?" She asked, suddenly serious.

"G-good. I mean, amazing. I mean I called her for..."

"353 nights yeah I know, I heard you at least 228 of them. I'm so happy for you, Mike."

"Thanks," he said quietly.

"What?"

"It's just... when can I see her again? It's not fair, Hopper just took her away again."

"Mike, it's dangerous."

"I know, but still."

"I know. Just remember, the most important thing is that she's safe, right?"

"Yes of course."

"Then just be patient. You will see her again. Maybe sooner then Hopper thinks even, I have a feeling the Lab will be busy dealing with other stuff than looking for her."

"That really was badass, what you did."

"Thank you."

"Did Jonathan say anything about Will today?"

"Just that he was sleeping when he left. He'll probably be at home for at least a bit longer."

"Yeah. And Joyce?"

"He's worried about her," she sighed. "With Bob and everything."

"Yeah. It sucks. He was a really cool guy. He was the one who figured out that Will drew a map of the Mindflayer and Hawkins. He was really smart."

"Wow, I didn't know he did that."

"Yeah, and he founded the AV Club. So cool."

"Yeah you mentioned that. I just met him once. Before we went to the lab. He sold me the tape recorder. He was really nice."

"Yeah."

They sat in silence for a moment, before Nancy changed the subject.

"So how the hell did that Max girl become part of your little... party or whatever you call it?"

"She's not a part of the party! Not really!"

"Oh yeah? Seems like it to me, after everything. Plus it would do you guys some good to get a girl in the mix even if she hasn't got superpowers."

"She's annoying. And Lucas and Dustin just swoon over her."

"You're annoying. And you swoon over Eleven."

"Point taken."

"Good. Be nice to her."

"Whatever. Here," he reaches into his pocket and gets out some change. "Told you I'd pay you back," he explains, handing it over before getting up off the bed.

"Thank you."

Mike holds in the doorway.

"I'm happy for you too, by the way," he says slightly embarrassed.

"What?"

"Jonathan. He's cool."

"Yeah, he is," she smiles and blushes. Looking down into her palm she realises something.

"Hey I'm still missing a nickel here!" She calls after Mike as he disappears into his room.

A/N: Sorry for the wait, thanks for your patience and reviews! Also special thanks to jancystrangerstuff on Tumblr for help with some details about US high schools for this and coming chapters.

7. You've done a good thing

"Hey mom, can I borrow the car?" She tried to sound as casual as possible as she walked into the kitchen.

"To go where?"

"Jonathan's."

"Well, if you take this with you," her mother answered, suddenly producing a casserole. "And give them my best."

"Thank you, I will." she took the casserole from her mother and went to the hall to get the car keys. There Mike ambushed her.

"Take me with you."

"Why?"

"I want to see Will!"

"Fine."

She knew today was going to be a good day just from the way Jonathan looked when he picked her up in the morning. He looked more rested and relaxed and she soon found out why. Will had continued to recover and wanted to be back in school sooner rather than later, and he'd even managed to get his mom to go to sleep last night. She'd been so happy for him and it hadn't mattered that everyone at school was just as horrible today as they had been yesterday, that didn't matter. He'd driven her home and they had separated, but she'd barely finished her physics homework before an intense need to see him again started to almost overtake her.

"You're going the wrong way," her brother informed her.

"We're making a stop first, smartass," she bit back.

"Where?"

"You'll see, just chill."

She pulled up outside a store on Main Street.

"Be right back," she left a frustrated Mike in the car.

Returning a minute later she thrust a box into his lap. He groaned, he already had the casserole.

"Hold this."

"A phone?" He questioned as he looked at the box.

"Yep, I broke theirs, when we were contacting Will."

"Yeah, Dustin mentioned."

They parked at the end of the Byers long driveway and stepped out of the car. She relieved Mike of the box containing the phone as they walked up to the porch and knocked.

"Hi," she greeted softly as Joyce opened the door.

"Hi!" The older woman looked a bit tired but smiled big at them, surprised.

"Sorry if it's a bad time, we just wanted to stop by and-"

"No no, it's not a bad time at all! Come in, come in!" Joyce waved them inside and they stepped over the threshold.

Jonathan got up from the couch where he'd been sat next to Will watching tv as he heard the voices.

"Hi," she smiled at him.

"Hey," he smiled back shyly.

"Hey Will!" Mike called and shoved the casserole into Jonathan's arms and made a beeline for the couch.

"Hey Mike," Will's voice was still sore but getting better and he positively beamed at the sight of his friend.

"Nice manners," Nancy commented and rolled her eyes. "So uh, mom

sends her love with this casserole," she explained.

"Oh, that's nice of her. Be sure to thank her for me?"

"I will. And uh, since I broke it I got you a new phone," she awkwardly held up the box.

"Oh you didn't have to do that," Joyce protested.

"You really didn't," Jonathan agreed.

"No I wanted to. One less worry and everything, I figured."

"Well thank you so much," Joyce said and accepted the box. Lowering her voice she continued. "And thank you again. For what you did."

"No problem," she answered quietly.

She made her way over to the couch as Jonathan and Joyce carried the items into the kitchen.

"Hey Will," she smiled softly.

"Hi Nancy."

"How are you feeling?"

"Good, better. Mom said she might let me go to school tomorrow."

"That's good. Does it hurt?" She winced as she thought of the scar on his side.

"No, just itches a bit."

"Hey want to play Atari?" Her brother cut in and Will's eyes lit up at that so she left them to it and ventured into the kitchen where Joyce and Jonathan had switched around, she was putting the casserole away while he was unpacking the phone.

"This was really thoughtful, both of these," Joyce stated. "I was just worrying about dinner."

"Yeah I think mom kind of has a sixth sense involving casseroles," she

joked, making Joyce smile.

They continued to chitchat while Jonathan hooked the phone up and checked for a tone, then dialed a number.

"Who are you ca-" Nancy started but before she could finish he started talking into the receiver.

"Hello, mrs. Wheeler? It's Jonathan Byers... Yes... yes, he's doing much better, thank you... Well we just wanted to call and thank you for the casserole. Mom says hello... Yes they're staying for dinner I think... Oh, um yes, that would be lovely... Thank you, bye."

He hung up. She gave him a look.

"What? Just being polite, and checking that I hooked it up right," he grinned.

"And?"

"And I think I'm having dinner at your place tomorrow."

She rolled her eyes. Over by the sink Joyce just watched the exchange with a smile.

"Want to go for a walk?" He suggested.

"Sure."

"Be back for dinner, I figure we'll heat up the casserole in about half an hour," Joyce said.

They went out the backdoor and headed for the woods. It was weird thinking about all that had happened here. She thought about Will running the opposite way to escape a monster. She thought about her brother finding a girl with a number for a name. She thought about Barb. She thought about crawling through a tree trunk, but also about being pulled back through it. She thought about Jonathan carrying his possessed, unconscious brother into Hopper's cabin, but also about Jonathan carrying Will back out. Bad memories, but not all bad. And with Jonathan's warm hand enveloping hers she had no fear as they walked along through the trees.

"What?" She's felt him steal glances at her at an almost alarming rate so she had to ask.

"Nothing, you just..."

"What?"

"You just look really beautiful right now."

She's not sure why it touches her so, maybe it was just the way he said it, like it was both an obvious fact and the most amazing thing in the world.

"I mean you always do but I just thought about it now and the light and-" He rambled on when she didn't answer. She gave him a light shove with her shoulder.

"You should take my picture," she suggested.

"I... don't have my camera," he suddenly realises. She can't help but laugh at that.

"For once in your life."

And she kisses him and he kisses her back. And he doesn't stop, and neither does she. Why would she ever? She thinks as he gently guides her forward until her back's against a tree trunk and his hands are cupping her face and her hands are pulling him closer. And it's not until she's pulling off his jacket and he's pulling off her coat and starts tugging her sweater up slightly that they realise it's november and actually freezing outside.

"Another time," she smiles and kisses him as he pulls her coat back on and she pulls up his jacket.

"Yeah," he breathes.

"Soon," she says coyly.

They make their way to the house. At least she can blame her flushed cheeks on the cold, she thinks as they step inside. Mike rolls his eyes at their hands interlocked, but Will just shrugs and smiles. They all

gather in the kitchen for the casserole.

xxx

The next morning they get a call to their new phone for the first time. He picks up the receiver for the second time.

"Jonathan?" Her voice sounds urgent.

"Nancy? What's going on?"

"Did you see the paper?"

"No we don't get the pa-" he cuts himself off, realizing. "Is it...?"

"Yes. Front page. Barb's sophomore picture blown up and everything. We did it."

"You did."

She doesn't answer and he instead just hear muffled sounds.

"Nance? You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she shakily gets out.

"You're crying," he states. She draws a deep breath.

"I know but it's not... I feel like someone lifted a weight off my shoulders."

"I get it. You did that. Hey, I'll see you soon."

"Yeah. See you soon."

When he picks her up for school, earlier than usual, she throws her arms around him as she gets in his car. He hugs her close.

"Sure you're alright?" He asks softly when she eventually pulls away.

"Yeah, it's just... I'm relieved and happy but at the same time... she's dead. She's still dead. And now everyone knows, which is what I wanted. And her parents knows. And it's better than them not

knowing but..."

"... she's still gone," he finishes for her.

"Yeah."

"That won't ever stop sucking but... people say it gets easier with time."

"Do you believe that?"

"I believe it doesn't get any worse."

"Yeah."

"And remember, you've done a good thing. Try to focus on that. It's better now than it was yesterday."

She nods and he finally drives, taking his time to let her collect herself.

She's not sure what to expect, more or less staring and whispering. It's about the same as earlier, but now also about Barb. Most people keep their distance so she's surprised when Allie approaches her at her locker.

"Hey, did you see the news?" Allie asks, gaze flickering from Nancy to Jonathan and back.

"Yeah, I did," she answers.

"It's awful."

"Yeah, it is."

"You never believed she ran off, did you?"

"No, I didn't. She wouldn't do that."

"Yeah. I'm sorry. Hey, I'll see you around."

"Bye."

And the other girl walks off again. Allie had always been... a kind of friend, more than an acquaintance, more than Stacy. She'd always been kind of on the same social scale as Nancy, but slightly more popular. But she'd known Barb too and always been nice to them, even during freshman year when Nancy and Barb kept almost exclusively to themselves. She hadn't seen her around much this week until now.

"That was nice of her," Jonathan remarked.

"Yeah, it was," she agreed. They headed off to class.

And that turns out to be it. After that the day just floats on as the previous. No one else says anything to her though she knows a lot of people are talking amongst themselves about it. No teacher says anything. Except for Allie and Steve people still avoid them. She didn't know what to expect but she'd take it. In fact it just means people leaving her in relative peace with Jonathan, and by the end of the day she feels alright. Good, even. Like he said. The world's better today than yesterday.

"Do you have to go straight home?" She asks as they get in his car again.

"No, but I start my shift at work in like a half-hour."

"Oh," she glances at him. Several times. Thinking about yesterday she feels a familiar urge start to build. "Well there's still a half-hour to fill," she continues and looks at him, holding his gaze.

"Mhm," he swallows hard, clears his throat and looks back at the road.

Her hand goes from his arm to his hand to his thigh. He clears his throat and takes the next right that as it happens they both know leads to nothing at all anymore on the outskirts of town. A nice secluded spot. She starts kissing his cheek by the time he passes Murphy's old abandoned house. He's not even at a full stop on the dirt road going off behind it before she's making her way over the midconsole, silently thanking her mother for insisting on the ballet classes when she was younger.

xxx

The next day Will's back at school, Joyce allowing it after making him promise to call her at work if he felt too tired or sick in any way. It all goes well and in the evening Karen Wheeler sets an extra plate for dinner.

They saw each other mere hours ago but he looks different as she opens the door before Jonathan even has a chance to ring the bell.

"Did you comb your hair?" She questions, in disbelief.

"What? Just trying to look presentable," he smirks. She rolls her eyes in response but can't quite hide her grin as he pulls him inside.

xxx

"So how's Will doing?" Mrs. Wheeler asks at the dinner table after the usual pleasantries, he's quite satisfied with himself so far considering that he normally is useless at chitchat.

"Oh much better, thank you. He was back at school today."

"Well I'm glad to hear that."

"And thank you again for the casserole, it was delicious."

"Oh, no problem. My pleasure."

Nancy gives him a smile and squeezes his hand under the table, he takes it as a signal that it's going alright so far.

"I have to say it was a bit of a surprise when Nancy told me about you two, but I did have my suspicions, when you came here to study for that big test last week."

They both blush at that.

"Uh yeah, yeah. It was a... big test."

"Did you pass it?" Mike suddenly pipes in with a smirk on his face.

"Uh, yeah. Thanks to Nancy," he answers while Nancy kicks Mike on

the shins.

Karen nods and then seems to look at her husband who's been sitting quietly eating his chicken, motioning with her fork toward Jonathan, seemingly silently asking mr. Wheeler to join in the conversation.

"So Jonathan, what's your father up to these days?"

Karen looks mortified and Nancy looks furious.

"Dad!" Nancy speaks before he can.

"Uh, don't know. Haven't seen him in a while," he manages to get out. "Prefer it that way," he adds under his breath. Nancy takes his hand again under the table, while still sending daggers at her father.

"So uh, do you... have any college plans? Or is it too early to think about that?" Mrs. Wheeler recovers, changing the subject and giving him the widest fake smile he's ever seen. Appreciating the effort, he goes along with it.

"No I want to go to NYU, always wanted. They have a great arts program."

"Oh yes, Nancy tells me you like photography?"

"Yeah, that's right. Hopefully I can get a scholarship, don't know if I can afford it otherwise but I'm trying to save up."

"You should get a scholarship, you're a great photographer," Nancy adds, squeezing his hand again.

"Hm. But photography, isn't that more of a hobby than a career? Not a lot of money in that," mr. Wheeler has decided to open his mouth again.

"Dad," Nancy shoots daggers again.

"What?" The clueless man looks confused.

"Uh, if you're good enough, there's money in it," he tries to answer.

"Well I'm sure you're very talented," mrs. Wheeler answers and nods before thankfully changing topic again, going for the safety of asking Holly about her day at preschool.

xxx

"That went well," Nancy says later as they stand on the porch saying goodbye.

"Your dad hates me."

"He doesn't hate you."

"Just my past and future, and the lack of money in both."

"Exactly. At least my mom likes you."

"Thought she'd break a cheekbone forcing those smiles."

"Yeah, well. Just another night at the end of the cul-de-sac with the nuclear family," she jokes, making him smile. She kisses him.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight," he smiles back. "See you tomorrow." He kisses her again.

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

A/N: Welp, a lot of different things in there, hope it wasn't too messy. As always thanks for all the reviews and all, I read them all even if I don't always reply.

8. Whole lot of not-caring going around

It's Friday and school's out. They have survived one week at the forefront of Hawkins High rumour mill. It's something to celebrate, Nancy decides. Jonathan agrees so they go to a diner downtown and get milkshakes.

"What are you thinking about?" He asks, noticing her creased eyebrows as she stares at the milkshake after taking a couple of sips.

"Nothing, just... this is something normal teenagers do. Get milkshakes."

"Yes?"

"And... I don't know. I haven't felt like a normal teenager for a long time. Y'know, Steve always wanted us to forget and be like that. But I couldn't, then."

"And now?"

"Now I think this is pretty nice. That we can do normal things, too."

"Not just topple government conspiracies?"

"Yeah. Do both."

"Yeah, it's nice."

"What do you want to do later?"

"Don't know, what do you want to do?"

"We could go see a movie?"

"On my night off," he smirks.

"We don't have to!"

"No it's fine. Plus I can get Eric to let us in for free."

"Nice. So what's playing now?"

"Uh, let's see... *No Small Affair*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *The Terminator*."

"What are they about?"

"Uh... *No Small Affair* is about this guy who takes a photo of a girl by accident and then falls in lov-," he cuts himself off, embarrassed. Nancy just laughs.

"Okay that might be a bit too close to home. Next?"

"Uh, well *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is a horror movie, obviously, about a serial killer and *The Terminator* is some action movie about a cyborg assassin."

"Hm, slim pickings."

"Yep. Eric likes *The Terminator*, but then again he also liked the third *Superman* movie so I don't trust him."

"Let's go for the horror, I want to see if fiction still scares me after everything," Nancy decided.

xxx

"Hey Eric," Jonathan greets as they walk into The Hawk later.

"Oh, hey Jonathan," Eric looks surprised to see him. Or, more specifically, looks very surprised to see him with a pretty girl.

"The Elm Street-screening isn't packed full, right?" He asks and gives his co-worker a look that finally snaps him out off looking somewhat bewildered at the two of them.

"Oh, no I can get you in."

"Thanks."

xxx

"Yeah that doesn't do anything for me anymore," Nancy declares as they leave.

"Yeah I noticed, you only jumped in your seat a half-dozen times," Jonathan ribs her.

"Shut up, I wasn't scared!"

"No, truth be told it looked more like you wanted to pull a gun at every jump scare," he smirks.

"Excuse me for having defense mechanisms!"

They continue their playful bickering all the way out of the theatre. He's just gotten his car keys out when a voice interrupts them.

"Hey Jonathan!" Eric calls, peaking his head out of the entrance. "Really sorry dude but could you just help me real quick? The register's jammed on me again and I don't remember how you fixed it last time."

He stops in his tracks and groans at Eric's clumsiness, and bad timing. But Nancy only looks amused. He sighs and tosses her the car keys.

"Be right back."

xxx

The content smile she wears drops as she nears his car and sees something tucked under the windshield wiper. A piece of paper, cut out from a newspaper she sees as she reaches out and grabs it. It's their story. Barb's face staring at her, with a crudely drawn speech bubble in red ink going out from it. 'Oh no! If I die sad and alone my only friend will turn into a slut!' it says. Her insides go cold. She vaguely hears the door of the burger place across the street open and people shuffle out.

"Something interesting?" It's Carol. The red-haired girl calls it casually over her shoulder, eliciting snickers from Tommy H. and their cronies.

Nancy later realised she hadn't truly known pure rage before this. She'd been angry before, even really angry like the time she slapped Steve. She had seen rage before, when Jonathan launched himself at Steve after the horrible things he had said about Will and Joyce.

She'd even been driven by a kind of deep anger when she declared to Jonathan that she wanted to kill the monster that had killed Barb. But that had been a stoic, collected anger she'd been able to focus into executing their plan. Now she felt the rage just immediately spill. She'd kept her cool with all the comments about her and Jonathan, it had been difficult but doable. But this crossed a line. Barb was her line.

She didn't even think, she just threw herself at Carol. Yelling something she didn't even remember afterwards she pushed her up against the wall of The Hawk. The older girl gasped in surprise, clearly not expecting a physical altercation. She was vaguely people yelling as she tried to get a good hit in but Carol managed to duck her head to the side slightly so she only partly connected. And then she felt someone grab her by the front of her sweater and slam her up against the wall. Tommy was much stronger than her and it almost got hard to breath when he pressed her up against the hard brick, hands gripping her sweater at the collar tightly and pressing up against her throat. He sneered something at her she didn't register as she struggled to break free.

And then suddenly Jonathan was there and Tommy H. was not pressing her up against the wall but knocked to the ground. Jonathan flew down on top of him, raining punches in. Tommy's cronies went into help and before she could react someone held her back while a blonde guy she didn't know the name of landed a punch above Jonathan's right eye. The blonde guy went in for another one but before he could connect sirens in the background interrupted and people started to scatter as Chief Hopper's booming voice sounded out. He pulled Jonathan off Tommy, urging him to calm down.

"You take care of this one, get him fixed up," Hopper ordered one of his deputies she wasn't sure of the name of, gesturing towards Tommy who was bleeding from the face.

"You and you," he smacked a hand down on Jonathan's shoulder and looked straight at Nancy, "come with me."

They piled in to the back seat of the Chief's cruiser, no cuffs, and he took off without a word.

"Are you okay?" Jonathan whispered.

"Yeah," she answered in an equally hushed tone. "Are you?"

"Yeah, what happened?"

She realised she still somehow had the newspaper cutout in her hand, crumpled and torn. She gave it to him.

"They stuck it on the windshield. I just lost it."

He took one look at it and didn't say anything else, instead just taking her hand in his. Looking out the window she realised they weren't going in the direction of the police station. She was about to open her mouth and ask where they were headed but decided against it when she caught a look of Hopper's grim face in the rearview mirror. She soon sees anyway, he's driving to the Byers house. He cuts the motor at the end of the driveway and turns around.

"I'm doing you both a favor here, considering everything. I can make this go away but we're going to go in there and you're going to tell me and Joyce what the hell just happened. Then I have some other things to ask you about too."

Joyce opens the front door before Jonathan can find his keys. Will is at a sleepover at her house, thankfully.

"What's going on?" She asks, looking worriedly from Jonathan to Hopper to her.

"Got a call about some teenagers fighting outside the movie theatre. Lo and behold I find these two there, and this genius working on giving that punk Harper kid a facial makeover. We're going to find out more," Hopper answers and leads them into the house.

He sits down opposite them at the kitchen table and lights a cigarette. Joyce gets out some ice for the cut above Jonathan's eye, then starts pacing the room with her own cigarette.

"It's my fault," she starts before Hopper can say anything.

"It's not your fault," Jonathan protests quietly.

"I don't care whose fault it is. Spill."

Nancy slams the newspaper cutout down on the table. Joyce leans forward and peers at it together with Hopper.

"This was on Jon's windshield when we got out from The Hawk. And they put it there, Carol and Tommy. They waited."

"Why on earth would someone do that?" Joyce wondered.

"They have it out for me. For us," she shrugs. "I don't care what they say about me all week. But this... I got mad and I punched her. Then Tommy had me up against the wall. Jonathan just fought him off."

"Did a little bit more than that I think," Hopper mutters.

"He deserved it," Jonathan is short and to the point.

"Agreed," Hopper mutters. Joyce nods and puts her cigarette out. "But still. Keep your goddamn cool. I can't be bothered with petty shit like this. Now I can probably write this off as a juvenile fight with no need to press charges. But you two hotheads should stay out of trouble, I can't guarantee I can get you off the next time."

"Sweetheart what do they say all week?" Joyce asked softly, catching Nancy off-guard with the question.

"What? Oh, nothing. They're just bullies. I don't care. Except for this."

Joyce kept looking at her though so she admitted. "They say I'm a slut because I broke up with Steve and got together with Jonathan. I don't care about that. I care what they say about Jonathan. And Barb."

Joyce nodded and then looked to her son.

"Jonathan. I want you to be honest with me. Do they still bully you at school?"

"Mom," he almost groans. "I don't care. About that."

"Whole lot of not-caring going around," Hopper mutters.

"I care about Nancy!" Jonathan raises his voice suddenly, frustrated.
"If people just leave us alone you won't hear of any trouble, Chief."

"Mm-hm. We'll see how that goes."

They're all silent for a moment before Hopper continues.

"Now to what I actually care about. This article," he gestures to the cutout. "Was your handiwork?"

"Yes," Nancy answers quickly.

"Okay. Good. It's working. They're in disarray over there."

"Good."

"Yeah. You covered your tracks? This doesn't lead back to you?"

She shakes her head.

"Alright. I'll take your word for it, but I'll still keep an eye out for you. That's why I'd prefer it if you could lay low for a while."

"How long will you keep El hidden for?"

"Don't know yet. Have to see how this plays out. And get some stuff in order."

"Mike misses her."

"I bet." Hopper gets up and leaves.

"Are you two okay?" Joyce asks.

"Fine," Jonathan answers for both.

"Sure?" They both nod.

"Just tired," Nancy adds.

"Yeah it's late. You can stay here."

"The car," Jonathan suddenly remembers.

"We'll get it tomorrow. You two go to bed."

They nod again. Joyce suddenly steps forward and envelops them both in a hug.

"Goodnight."

xxx

"Sorry about tonight," she whispers as they lay in bed.

"Not your fault."

"I lost my temper."

"I would've too. It couldn't have gone any other way. It's their fault. Their horrible people."

"Yeah."

"God, Monday will be interesting," she says after laying quiet for a moment.

"Yeah."

"Wonder if being known as a psycho is better than as a slut," she muses.

"Maybe, from my experience people tend to keep their distance then."

"Hope you're right."

A/N: That feeling when you look up movies who premiered in november 1984 and find that trio like a little gift. Anyway, difficult chapter to write, I've been building to a confrontation with Carol and Tommy but re-wrote that and the whole chapter several times (at first it was in school and involved Steve helping out as well, but ugh, it felt too melodramatic. Wound up doing this to get Hopper in the mix and follow up on/lead in a bit on The Lab and El ahead of the Snowball). As always thanks for all the reviews and everything!

9. Not out of place

Turns out psycho is better than slut because for now they're left in relative peace at school, even Carol and Tommy now keeping a certain distance.

"Do you have to go straight home?" She asks after school one day.

"No."

"Good, we need to make a stop."

xxx

The knock on the cabin door sends Hopper on high alert, he is already trying to send El into her room and getting his gun when the voice outside relaxes them both. He sighs, swings the door open and quickly lets Nancy and Jonathan in before shutting it again after taking a peek around in every direction.

"What are you doing here?" His gruff voice don't faze either of them. Nancy waves to El, who looks very intrigued and excited to see other people than Hopper.

"You're in contact with Dr. Owens, right?" Nancy gets right to the point, knowing that Hopper is even more of a straight-talker than she is.

"Yes, what's it to you?"

"Got some demands."

"What?" Hopper sighs.

"They should pay for the funerals. For Barb and for Bob. If they don't some anonymous sources might tell some newspapers that Bob disappeared while he was exploring the area around the lab because of the myths he'd heard about it. Even if we don't have any hard evidence to give, if several different people all say that Bob told them that was what he was doing well... it won't do wonders for their PR department."

Hopper sighs heavily again.

"You're one conniving bastard of a kid, you know that?"

"Thank you."

"I'll talk to him."

"Good," she turns to El. "How are you, El?"

"Bored," the girl answers straightforwardly. Hopper looks exasperated.

"I would be too," Nancy chuckles. "What do you do all day?"

"Watch TV. Read books. And dictionary."

"Hey, maybe we could bring you some new stuff? Like some books and magazines so you've got more to read. And some of my old clothes that could fit you? Would you like that?"

"Yes!" El's eyes light up.

"Hey now, you shouldn't be coming here, it's not safe," Hopper protests.

"Jesus, we weren't followed today, we made sure of it. But if you're so paranoid, can you pick up the stuff at his place?" Nancy gestures to Jonathan. Hopper's about to protest again but the look on El's face sways him. He can't say no to that.

"Fine."

"Great. Oh, I'll ask Mike and the boys, I'm sure they'll have lots of stuff for you."

"Hey, you can't let your brother know where we are though, sorry but we definitely can't have him come running here."

"Yeah yeah, I'll talk to Mike. He'll understand, the only thing he cares more about than seeing El is that she's safe," she turns back to El. "He really misses you. But I think he's making a whole list of things he

wants to show you and things you can do together, for later."

El's eyes light up again at that. "Tell him... I miss him too. Want to see him."

"I will."

"Hey, this is what you have for music?" Jonathan asks, speaking for the first time since they entered the cabin. He's quickly flipping through the records Hopper's got in a stack.

"Yeah, got a problem with those classics?" Hopper crosses his arms, defensively.

"No no, they're fine I guess just... old."

Hopper mutters something about kids these days not appreciating good music. El's eyes goes between the two, curious about Jonathan, she asks, shyly:

"Do you have other music?" Feeling a bit mischievous, her word of the day for last Wednesday, she adds "Not old music?" Hopper groans.

"Uh yeah," Jonathan answers. "I could make you some mix tapes, if you want?"

"Mix tapes?"

"Oh, uh, it's a thing that you can have music on, like this," he points to one of Hopper's records, "but instead of a whole album of songs by one band I can put songs from some different people on it, so you can hear some different stuff. And you can play it on this," he points to a radio with a tape deck he noticed earlier.

"I'd like that."

"Cool."

Nancy hugs El goodbye before they leave.

xxx

Mike catches her when she's throwing all kinds of books and magazines she's got lying around into a box, followed by a wide assortment of her old clothes. She sits him down on the bed and explains her idea and reiterates that no, Hopper won't allow him to know of their location yet. Eventually she convinces him to continue to be patient and he then runs off to gather all kinds of things for El. Dustin and Lucas add some stuff as well and when she takes the huge box over to the Byers next time she goes over there Will is quick to throw in some of his crayons and sheets of paper as Jonathan adds a bunch of tapes. Hopper comes by the next day and grumbles over the sheer weight of the box but carries it to his cruiser.

xxx

It's quiet in the car on the way to the cemetery, her mother and father thankfully not in the mood for mundane chitchat given the situation. She is in the backseat looking out of the window, trying to sort out her conflicted feelings. She's relieved that Barb's parents finally know the truth and won't spend their lives wondering. But it's such an awful truth. Yes, she hopes it will bring some closure, but closure will only get you so far. Barb's still dead. That's the most awful thing, and something that will never change. She tries to focus on Jonathan's words, that day the truth came out. They've done a good thing. But she still dreads seeing the casket, knowing it's empty, knowing where Barb's body really lies and rots. She dreads seeing mr and mrs Holland. She had to get the truth out there. But now she will have to see the reaction to it. It's better than them not knowing, she tells herself again. But it still won't be good. It won't be easy. Nothing about this could ever be.

Jonathan is waiting near the cemetery gates when they arrive. She almost collapses into his arms and he holds her close, ignoring the looks from mr and mrs Wheeler who shuffle on into the graveyard. There's really no words to be said, so he just takes her hand when she eventually pulls away from the hug, giving it a squeeze before they walk on.

Steve comes too, she could hug him for that but resists, unsure of how he would feel about that. Maybe the eye contact is enough, at least it feels like he understood her look of appreciation. She looks around further as the priest begins the service, because she can't bear

to look too long at Barb's parents or the casket yet. There's only a handful of other people present. She vaguely recognises some of Barb's relatives from birthday parties past. Their English teacher from freshman year is there. For a second she's glad, Barb loved that class, she always liked to write and excelled in it. Then she realises that Mrs Carmichael is the only one of their teachers there. And with the exception of herself, Jonathan and Steve, not one student of Hawkins High showed up. Screw them all. You were always too good for this goddamn town anyway, she thinks as she finally looks down at the casket for the first time and feels a tear run down her cheek. More fall when she finally dares glancing to Mr and Mrs Holland and see the pain and mourning still fresh in them.

When the service ends she tries to work up the nerve to walk up to them. Momentarily her feet feel bolted to the ground, but a quick glance to Jonathan and his hand enveloping hers calms her enough to work up the courage and get her feet moving.

"I'm so sorry. I don't know what to say. She didn't deserve this. She was so good, she was the best friend anyone could ever have," she gets out in one go, afraid that she won't be able to start again if she stops.

They both nod with tears still in their eyes. "Thank you dear. I'm so glad she had you as a friend," Mrs Holland tells her.

At that, her throat closes and the tears threaten to spill over again. She quickly wipes at her eyes with a tissue Jonathan had given her earlier.

She goes home with Jonathan. At first he just drives for a while, holding her hand as she cries. Eventually when she's collected herself somewhat she gives him a nod and he heads down the familiar path to his house. Joyce is chain-smoking over some papers at the kitchen table when they get inside. The papers have to do with Bob and his funeral, she learns later. Joyce looks miserable but the look she gives her feels warm. She can only nod in turn, not trusting her voice at the moment. Jonathan leads her to his room. She lies down on his bed as he momentarily disappears to check on Will in the next room. When he returns he turns on his record player, letting Joy Division fill the room as he lays down next to her on the bed, wrapping both arms

around her as she nestles into his chest. They lay in silence like that for a while, Ian Curtis the only voice in the room.

"What's this song called?" Nancy asks eventually, voice low and slightly hoarse from crying.

"*Atmosphere.*"

"I like it."

"Yeah, it's great."

Worn like a mask of self-hate

"I listened to it over and over again when I thought Will was dead," he confesses. She tightens her hold of him.

Don't walk away, in silence

"Thank you for being here with me," she says softly as the song closes.

"Thank you. For everything," he answers and hugs her closer, planting a kiss on her head.

xxx

Lately it feels like she's spending more time at the Byers than her own house. At first she was afraid that she was overstaying her welcome but every time she tried to apologise Joyce just waved her off and finally insisted on her stop thinking that. "You're always welcome here, with or without Jonathan." She had soon also insisted that Nancy should call her Joyce and not Mrs Byers. Joyce has good days and bad days, but most days have a bit of both. Her sons and their happiness and wellbeing gave her light and kept her grounded when dealing with the loss of Bob, both mentally and practically.

Right now they've just finished a study session in Jonathan's room (yes, actually studying. For the most part.) and venture out towards the kitchen to find Joyce engaged in a phone call.

"Yes... Uh-huh... Mm-hm... Of course... I will take care of that. No,

of course not... Yes... Thank you. Goodbye."

She hangs up the phone and puts her head in her hands, taking a deep breath.

"Are you ok?" Nancy asks, carefully.

"Oh," Joyce startles slightly and turns around to face them. "Yeah, yeah. Just, helping Bob's parents with the uh, funeral. They're older and they live in Maine so... hard for them to deal with the logistics."

"Mom, let me help you," Jonathan steps forward.

"Oh no sweetiee you do-"

"Mom, come on," he notices a list on a notepad by the phone with some items crossed off it but one underlined several times.

"Mom, I'll come with you for the casket and all the rest," he says, gentle but with force behind it. Nancy flashes back to a year ago, when she found him looking at coffins alone at the funeral parlor.

"No you don't have to, plus I don't want to leave Will home alone," Joyce replies.

"I can stay with him," Nancy pipes in. "We'll have fun."

It looks like Joyce about to protest again, not wanting to be a bother, but her expression soon changes into a look of appreciation mirroring that of her eldest son.

"Thank you sweetheart. Okay. We might as well get this done."

They explain the situation to Will, who's just emerged from his room where he'd been locked into his own study session, trying to catch up with his missed schoolwork. He only shrugs and smiles when he learns that Nancy will stay. She was worried he wouldn't like it, she definitely knows Mike would have sulked at having a "babysitter" but Will is so easygoing. And it's not like babysitting just... to ease Joyce's mind. She thinks maybe Will's very aware of that as well. And perhaps he doesn't want to be alone either.

xxx

Will sits down at the living room table where he left all his drawing material the previous night so she joins him on the couch.

"These are really good, Will," she says, looking over the different sheets of papers lying around. He's currently working on the shadowy background surrounding some kind of fantasy knight character she vaguely recognizes from years of being Mike Wheeler's big sister.

"Thanks," he says, not looking up, keeping his focus on the picture.

"Wish I was good at something like that. Like your drawing, or Jon with his photography. Even Mike with his stories. He's actually really good at making them up. Don't tell him I said that."

Will smiles. "Everyone's got their thing. You're smarter than all of us. Like coming up with plans and stuff."

"Thanks. I used to draw a little, when I was younger. I was never any good, not like you."

"What did you draw?" He looks up.

"Oh, just small things. Mostly in notebooks when I was bored in class. I used to dance so I liked to draw a ballerina."

"Show me," he instantly shoves over a paper and crayons.

"Well, you start like this," she she leans forward and grabs a lightblue crayon and starts drawing the ballerina. "Like this," she continues, she finds that she still remembers the way, logged deep into the back of her mind.

"There," she finishes.

"That's good!" Will declares. Looking closer, he continues. "That pose is so cool, you could make into a ninja or something like," he excitedly grabs a crayon and quickly starts making lines on another sheet of paper and soon the outline of a ninja appears in the same stance as her ballerina with one leg raised but in a fighting move instead of dancing.

"Wow."

"Want to play Atari?" He suddenly asks.

"Yes! I'm gonna kick your ass. Or at least learn enough so I can beat Jon at it."

"Hm, the latter is a possibility at least," he grins.

After half an hour of *Ms. Pacman* they give it up after a frustrated Nancy calls the titular character "bitch" for yet again getting caught way to soon. They switch to *Defender* after that which Nancy soon decides is more up her sleeve, killing aliens invading their world. After almost an hour of *Defender*, which Will still got her beat on but at least it's getting close, they pause to make some grilled cheese. They've returned to the game by the time Joyce and Jonathan get back.

"Hey, how did it go?" She stands up and ask.

"We've got it done," Jonathan answers.

"I'm gonna make us something to eat, you guys hungry?" Joyce asks.

"No we already ate," Will answers.

"Mom I can take care of it," Jonathan says.

"No, sit, it'll take my mind of things."

"Okay."

"Come on, I'm gonna destroy you at *Defender* now," Nancy declares, tugging Jonathan to the couch. Joyce smiles slightly as she turns to the kitchen while Will smirks and hands over a control to Jonathan.

"You're on, Wheeler."

And Jonathan gets his ass kicked, Nancy looking very pleased with herself. Jonathan is at least gracious in defeat, though he does rib Will for cheering Nancy on instead of his own brother.

xxx

They have Bob's funeral the next week. There's more people at that one. Their whole weird monster hunting family, Bob's parents and other family members, Mr. Clarke, Bob's other friends and colleagues she doesn't know. She stands with the Byers family, Jonathan stoically holding it together for his mom and little brother who's both crying. She realise that it feels horrible, witnessing their heavy grief, but that she doesn't feel out of place, as she passes another tissue to Joyce while Jonathan places a steady hand on Will's shoulder.

Later they take care of dinner, manage to convince Joyce to rest for a while, and play more Atari with Will. When they turn in for the night, Joyce not minding at all her staying over anymore and her own mother not seeming to care, Jonathan finally lets go and cries against her shoulder as she holds him. He cries for Bob, for Will and for his mom. She turns on his record player and they repeat the ritual from last week as they lay down on the bed.

Hunting by the rivers through the streets every corner

Abandoned too soon

10. The way I feel it must be spring

They all help Bob's parents pack up his house. At first it was only Joyce, then Jonathan, Will and Nancy, but after making sure mr and mrs Newby were comfortable with it they enlist Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Max to help out as well. Steve drives Dustin over and ends up staying and helping out as well, carrying out all the heavier furniture together with Jonathan and even taking the furniture mr and mrs Newby won't keep to a charity shop downtown. Joyce brings up the subject of the things Bob left at her place but the elderly couple waves her off, insisting she'd keep it, if she wanted. And as the boys goes through Bob's collection of games and comic books mrs Newby lets them all take what they want. "He would've wanted it to come to use rather than it all sitting in boxes in our attic," she says. The things they themselves wanted to have as keepsakes of their only son they had already put away in their car.

So the video camera Bob lent them for Halloween ends up in Jonathan's permanent care. He still goes everywhere with the camera Nancy got him last christmas, but inside the house he prefers to film "everything" to both Will's and Nancy's chagrin. Though she could always get him to drop the camera by casually suggesting that there's something else they could *do*, if he wanted.

xxx

One day Hopper is waiting on the Byers front porch when they get home from school.

"I need your help," he says, eyeing Nancy.

"With what?"

"The Snow Ball."

El peeks her head out the door.

They end up taking Jonathan's car, Hopper deciding it would draw less attention, as they drive to a mall, not their mall but a mall three towns over, on Hopper's insistance. El giddily chats the whole way,

excited to be talking to other people than Hopper for a change. She tells Nancy which of all the Nancy Drew books she gave her were her favourite and can't stop talking about the fact that Nancy is also called Nancy. She thanks Jonathan for the mixtapes and begs for more, which he is happy to oblige. When prodded on what music she liked the most she ranks David Bowie and Ziggy Stardust at the top. Jonathan struggles to explain that they are the same person.

When they get there Hopper at first follows close behind them as Nancy leads El into a shop to look for a dress but Nancy soon tires of it.

"Hey, this is girl time," she declares.

"What?"

"Girl time," El insists.

"Circle the perimeter or whatever, if it makes you feel better. You too, out" Nancy continues and shoos both Hopper and Jonathan out of the store.

Hopper walks back and forth outside the store, keeping track of anyone and everyone walking by in the general vicinity. Jonathan is content to just sit down on a bench, but makes sure he has a clear view of the store front, just in case.

At first El asks her about the different dresses, but Nancy soon steers the conversation the other way, prying El for what colors and patterns and all she likes. She gives some pointers as far as matching colors and combining with shoes and accessories, but she's insistent that El pick out dresses she herself likes. They wind up carrying five different dresses over to the changing room. Even with Nancy's assurances that she was right outside El don't close the door fully, not liking small enclosed places. The dresses were in varying colors, from soft pink to green tones but it's the blue one with faded pink dots and a belt that makes Eleven just stare at herself in the mirror.

"Oh, that looks great on you!" Nancy says excitedly.

"Pretty?" El asks, eyes going from her own reflection in the mirror to

Nancy's.

"Very," Nancy confirms.

"Will Mike like it?"

"Of course! Then again you could be wearing a trashbag and he'd still flip. Do you like it? That's what's important."

"Yes. Love it."

"Then I think we've found your dress, El."

"Finally," Hopper mutters as they exit the store. Jonathan stretches as he rises from the bench.

"Yes, now we'll look for shoes!" Nancy informs them.

Hopper's subsequent groan is loud enough to reach the second floor.

xxx

Mike sulks in his room the day before the Snow Ball. She's tempted to let him know, but no, she won't ruin the surprise. She can't wait to see the look on his face when El walks in. But she at least got to make sure he isn't so glum that he'll not even go.

"Hey."

"Hey," he sighs and barely looks up.

"Come on Mike, it's alright. Just hang on a little longer and the Chief will let up."

"This sucks so bad. I waited 353 days, seriously, how many more will it be?"

"Not that many, I think."

"How do you know?"

"Come on, Hopper's reasonable. He's just waiting to see the Lab's next move, they're kind of unpredictable at the moment y'know."

"I promised I'd take her to the Snow Ball and now we're going to miss it for the second year in a row."

"I know, I know, but hey, other times will come."

"Yeah yeah, everything "will come", later. But what about now?"

"Now? Well for now you'll have to make due with having fun with your friends tomorrow. Normal, regular fun without monsters from other dimensions or anything. Think you should appreciate that, considering everything."

"I guess."

"If nothing else you can sit with Will and Dustin and make faces at Lucas while he tries to be smooth with Max," she smirks, eliciting a small laugh from Mike.

"Okay."

"And if it still sucks we can ditch and go for burgers or something."

"Deal."

xxx

In the early evening before the Snow Ball Jonathan drives them over to the cabin so she can help El get ready. Music is playing as Hopper opens the door. They greet El who is standing in the middle of the front room. The girl says hello and turns to Hopper.

"Again."

"No, I think we got it, kid."

"No, one more time," El insists.

"Fine," Hopper sighs.

Nancy and Jonathan share a look of curiosity as Hopper steps toward the girl. They put their hands on each other and start to move to the music. Nancy can't stop grinning at what she's witnessing.

"Shame you don't have the video camera with you," she whispers to Jonathan.

"The Chief would kill me," he smirks.

"Is this right?" El suddenly asks.

"Kid I told you, this is how it's done," Hopper answers.

"Nancy, is this right?"

"Yeah, that's it. You're doing great," she confirms.

"Told you," Hopper sighs.

"Wanted to make sure."

Nancy and El disappear into her room, leaving Jonathan and Hopper standing around awkwardly in the front room. She answers all of El's questions about the Snow Ball while doing her hair and makeup, explaining that it will all be kids her age, and Mike and all of her friends will be there, that they will play both fast and slow songs and that she will be there helping out and that Jonathan will be taking pictures. She tries to steady El's nerves, promising that Mike will just be so excited to see her but that she also happens to look gorgeous. When she's finished they venture back into the living room.

"What do you think?" El asks Hopper who's sitting on the couch, fiddling with something in his hands while Jonathan comes to a halt from pacing back and forth in the room.

"You look great, kid. Hey I don't know if this will mess up your outfit or whatever," Hopper begins as he rises from the couch. "But uh, I got this, if you want it. It was, it was Sara's. Figure it should come to use."

He holds out a bracelet.

"Yes, thank you," El barely audibly answers and puts it on her wrist.

Nancy, feeling a bit out of place witnessing this encounter excuses both herself and Jonathan.

"Hey, we should go and help with the preparations. We'll see you at the dance, El."

"Thank you, Nancy."

Nancy lingers at the door with Hopper.

"You're a big softie, Chief."

He only gives a grumble in response, looking away and shutting the door in her face.

xxx

"Jonathan!" Mr. Clarke calls, making him turn around from his spot on the edge of the dance floor, camera in hand. His old science teacher is looking a bit frantic, seemingly trying to run three different stations at once. "Have you seen Nancy?"

"Yes," he can't help but smile as he nods his head towards where Nancy is dancing with Dustin, the wide grin on Dustin's face visible all the way over to them. Mr. Clarke nods and his moustache turn upward. Jonathan decides to help out and serve punch for a while, having gotten more than enough shots of the dance floor in his opinion, though he wondered if whoever did the middle school yearbook would object to the fact that his girlfriend, little brother and friends were in focus for all of them.

"Hey."

Nancy's back from her trip to the dance floor, a happy Dustin now sitting at a table with Will, who apparently was done dancing with that girl Jonathan didn't know but would be sure to ask Will about later.

"Hey," he couldn't stop smiling at her.

"That was really nice of you, Nancy," Mr. Clarke cuts in.

"It was the least I could do," Nancy shrugged. "He's such a sweet kid."

Jonathan stays with her at the punch table which only slows service

down as they end up trading memories of the gym their currently in from their own middle school days and Snow Balls past.

"I remember the Snow Ball in sixth grade. Barb and I went together, as usual. But we kind of thought all the boys in class were idiots. No offence."

"None taken, you were right, myself included," he laughs.

"Nah you were alright, you were always nice, when you actually said something," she gave him a light shove with her hip. "Anyway I remember that we just sat on the bleachers and ate snacks and watched everyone else. George Daniels came up and asked me to dance but he had made fun of Barb's glasses the week before so I told him to get lost."

"Right on."

"Yep."

Mike and El comes over, hand in hand, Mike blushing slightly at his older sister.

"Hey guys, how's your night? You having fun El?" Nancy asks.

"Yes!" El smiles wide.

"Good! Hey, have you guys had your portrait taken?"

"No."

"Well you've got to, come on, Jon, get back there!" Nancy quickly shoves Jonathan back towards his earlier station and instructs El and a flustered Mike to follow. Mike lingers for just a moment.

"She told me you helped her get ready. Can't believe you kept it a secret."

"I like surprises."

"Well, thanks."

"No problem. Now go, go!"

She watches from afar as Jonathan snaps several pictures of Mike and El.

"Hello! Nancy?" She's snapped out of her staring as Lucas calls and snaps his fingers. He's got Max with him.

"Oh, hey guys," she greets and pours them both some punch. "How's it going?"

"Great!" Lucas smile is almost blinding.

"Yeah, he's pretty alright actually," Max adds.

"You guys should be next," Nancy smiles and nods in the direction of Jonathan, Mike and El.

"Do you wanna?" Lucas looks giddily at Max.

"Fine, Stalker," the redhead rolls her eyes but smiles.

"Have fun!" She calls after them.

They continue to help out for the rest of the dance and stay behind when it ends to help clean up. She loses track of Jonathan as she's clearing the punch table but looks up as smooth jazz fills the room. Jonathan's at the sound system talking with the DJ. He walks over to her with a shy smile and stretches out a hand.

"Shall we?"

She can't help but grin like an idiot as she takes his hand. He leads her out on the empty dance floor and places a gentle but firm grip on her hips as she puts her hands around his neck. They start to sway to the sound of Billie Holiday.

"I recognize this," she says with a sly grin.

"Yep."

"Murray played it..."

"Yeah," he's almost blushing now.

"I love it," she lets him know.

"Me too."

"So, did you swipe it from him?"

"Hah, no. I couldn't get it out of my head, any of it from that day... or night, or morning. I found it in the record store on Main Street. Was thinking of saving it for your birthday or something but then you volunteered us for this and I thought..."

"I love you." She kissed him.

"Love you too."

They continue dancing. The sound of Holiday eventually fades out, but instead of silence, Roy Orbison follows. She raises an eyebrow at him.

"So it turns out they have a pretty big supply of jazz records in the back of the store..."

"Okay how much time did you spend there?!" She asks, shaking her head but failing to wipe the grin off her face.

"Not too long, Rodney who runs the place keeps it well-organized. And he was pretty helpful. Honestly I think he was just happy to see me out of the punk and alternative section for once."

She draws him closer and puts her head on his shoulder for the rest of the song.

They gather their things and sneak out of the gymnasium hand in hand. Nancy keeps looking up at Jonathan and each time find him sneaking the same glances down at her. A familiar feeling stirs in her. Taking a quick look around and noting the emptiness of the hallway and the relative seclusion of the corner she presses Jonathan up against the wall and kisses him. The way he kisses her back almost take her breath away, just like the first night.

"Did I tell you how gorgeous you look tonight?" He asks in a husky voice.

"Only like five times," she answers and crashes her lips into his again.

Their make out session is on the verge of developing into something more as Jonathan's hands starts to get dangerously low, making her almost gasp. It's not until the sound of someone clearing their throat sound out that they pull away. Flustered and redfaced they look at Mr Clarke.

"Ahem, if you could maybe take that somewhere else, so I could lock up?"

"Oh, yes, sorry Mr Clarke," Nancy's quick to answer despite her face turning redder by the second. Getting caught making out in middle school by her old science teacher wasn't something she exactly thought would happen to her at 17. "Goodnight," she offers as she pulls Jonathan with her out the door. Mr Clarke gives a small wave.

They go back to his place, separating now very much not an option. It's quiet and dark in the house, both Joyce and Will having gone to bed so they are as quiet as possible as they sneak into his room and continue from where they left off. Joyce is cool but maybe they shouldn't press their luck, she thinks.

xxx

She wakes up in her underwear to an empty bed the next morning, but rolling over to the spot where he slept it's still warm so he must have just risen. Her eyes peek open and she takes a look around his room. Her dress that she'd carelessly left on the floor during last night's passionate encounter is now hanging neatly from the back of a chair. She goes to his closet and finds a pair of sweatpants and a black t-shirt with a Sonic Youth print that she pulls on.

She finds him in the kitchen, making breakfast. She sneaks up on him and squeezes herself in between him and the kitchen sink, locking her arms around his neck and giving him a kiss.

"Good morning."

"Very," he answers. "I thought I'd let you sleep."

"Not as comfy without you."

They hear doors opening and closing in other parts of the house so she disentangles herself from him and takes a seat at the kitchen table while he returns to the stove.

"Morning, Will."

"Hey buddy."

"Morning," the youngest Byers answer and takes a seat at the table.

"Did you have fun last night?" She asks.

"Yeah."

"Who was that girl you were dancing with?" Jonathan asks.

"Oh, Laurie Bennett."

"Cool," Nancy declares.

"How did you ask her?" Jonathan asks, intrigued.

"I didn't, she asked me," Will shrugs.

"Wow, very cool!" Nancy levels it up to. "She must be into you then."

"You think so?"

"Of course! She wouldn't bother otherwise! Do you like her?" She probes, carefully.

"I barely know her. She sits next to me in English."

"Well how did it go?"

"Okay I guess. I don't even know if I like dancing that much, do you?"

"Yeah, now I do," Jonathan answers straightaway, causing Nancy to look down and shake her head, trying to mask her smirk as Will looks

between the two of them.

"Morning," Joyce joins them just as Jonathan sets plates of eggs and toast on the table.

"Morning!"

"How was your night?"

"Great," Nancy and Jonathan answer at the same time.

"Hey, I saw your brother with El, they're so sweet together."

"Yeah. Was Hopper able to pry them apart even?" Nancy asks, grinning.

"Just barely," Joyce smirks. "So, what do you guys have planned for today?"

"Don't know," Nancy says, looking to Jonathan who shrugs. "Guess we'll see where the day takes us."

A/N: And there we are, the Snow Ball. Technically that's the end of the gaps in season 2 but it's not the end of this. I've got more scenes written and several more ideas floating around but it may take some time to figure out the order of them (i.e. I've got almost a whole New Years chapter down but don't want to straight to that and also don't want to go back and forth chronologically).

Two small notes on this chapter 1) I know El said that she didn't know how to dance but I couldn't resist writing that scene plus I think you could also interpret the scene in the show as her being nervous at seeing all the other kids dancing. 2) Billie Holiday - You Better Go Now and Roy Orbison - Blue Bayou are the two great jazz songs that plays over scenes at Murray's in 2x06, even if they were played *over*, not *in* scenes (i.e non-diegetic music) I headcanon that Murray played both songs at some point.

Thanks so much for all the reads, reviews, follows and favorites!

11. A new tradition

Mr. Wheeler is sitting in the driver's seat of their car when he arrives at the Wheeler's, parking his own car by the curb. Jonathan gives an awkward nod to his girlfriend's father, who nods back just as awkwardly. He knocks on the front door which quickly swing open. Nancy smiles and says hello but then quickly turns back to her mother who's standing next to her in the hall.

"But we've got plans, we were going to see a movie and-, whatever, I just thought you were taking her with you," Nancy said, slightly agitated.

"Hello Jonathan," Mrs. Wheeler greeted. He mumbled a hello back while Mrs. Wheeler continued the discussion with Nancy. "Well it's not that kind of trip, you know, your father and I haven't had any time to ourselves for a long time and when I was at the hairdresser's I read this magazine article that said-"

"Oh God I don't wanna know what it said!" Nancy cut off, looking horrified.

"Well I'm sorry if we weren't clear before and sorry about your plans, but I need you to watch Holly! Can't you just watch a movie here instead, Jonathan is welcome to stay of course." That statement silenced Nancy, not expecting her mother to have such a relaxed attitude to her boyfriend. Then again she seemed desperate.

Right at that moment the little girl came running in with a stuffed animal clutched firmly in one hand. She looked from her mother to her sister but then discovered that there was another person there, someone she also recognised.

"Jon-a-than!" She sounded out the three syllables, very proud of mastering it.

"Hi Holly!" He smiled. He had always had a way with young kids, finding them easier to interact with than most people his own age. Since he started spending more time at the Wheeler's then before Holly had quickly taken a shine to him.

Mrs. Wheeler beamed at them and he could see a smile tugging at Nancy's lips as well before she bit it down and crossed her arms.

"Fine," she huffed.

"Thank you honey," Mrs. Wheeler started. The sound of the car horn outside interrupted briefly. "Okay, I gotta go, I left some money on the counter for food if you need it, there's still some leftovers in the fridge too, we'll be back tomorrow afternoon," she continued before quickly kissing both of her daughters goodbye and giving Jonathan a pat on the arm on her way out the door.

"So uh, yeah. I'm apparently babysitting this weekend," Nancy started as they heard a car pulling out of the driveway. "You don't have to stay, I mean. If you don't want to."

"No I want to," he answered, putting an arm around her and settling for a kiss on the cheek as he felt Holly's eyes staring up at them. "Who's that, Holly?" He asked and gestured to the stuffed animal she held, who he now recognized was a dog.

"Kenny!" She yelled and held him up excitedly.

"No one knows why," Nancy answered as he looked to her for an explanation.

"Okay, hello Kenny, nice to meet you," he greeted the toy, making Holly giggle.

"I wanna play," the toddler then announced and promptly took a firm grip of his hand, making them follow her as she trudged off to the living room where he soon found out she'd left about six other stuffed animals.

"So what are you guys doing for Thanksgiving?" Nancy asked, they were able to keep a conversation going while simultaneously playing with Holly. The little girl were satisfied with them sitting with her on the floor and each holding the stuffed animal she had delegated to them (insisting that Nancy have Kurt the Turtle and Jonathan have Bun-Bun) while she herself orchestrated a tea party between them.

"Oh, uh, same as usual I guess."

"Which is?"

"Mom gets a good deal on one of the cheap turkeys at work, we cook it together. Eat, then we watch *Charlie Brown*. That's basically it."

"That's nice."

"Yeah," he shrugs. "What do you guys do?"

"Mom fusses in the kitchen all day, dad sits in his chair and watch tv as always, mom gets mad because no one's helping then gets mad when I screw up the cranberry sauce and Mike sets the table wrong and Holly gets cranky 'cause she's hungry and dad still can't be bothered. Then we sit down and eat and say how thankful we are for each other."

"Sounds traditional," he quips.

"Yep," she smirks, before her face falters. "Last year was the worst. Just weeks after... you know. Dad was as he always is but Mike was sad about Eleven so he just sat in the basement clutching his Super-Com the whole day, he barely came up for dinner even. And mom and I fought the whole day."

"Why?"

"I wasn't very helpful. Had a nightmare the night before so I didn't sleep at all so I screwed up more than normal in the kitchen – you know I can't cook right?"

"Right."

"Yeah so she got mad and I got madder and just, yeah. It sucked."

"Sorry."

"How was your last?"

"Good, actually. Will came home from the hospital the week before. He couldn't eat much but we got a turkey and everything. It was like our first night back to normal since... I mean, as normal as it ever gets, after everything."

"Yeah. That's good."

"Yeah, traditions can be good sometimes," he looked far away as he kept remembering. "And we had stuff to be really thankful for. It was the first time in years we actually said what we were thankful for. We stopped doing that after-" he suddenly trailed off.

"After what?"

"Uh, after dad left."

"Oh. Sorry, I didn't rea-"

"We always had to say we were thankful for him, if we didn't he got mad..." He stopped again and blinked rapidly.

"Hey," she reached out and took his hand. "It's okay. I'm sorry." Her heart broke for him as she thought of everything he, Will and Joyce had to endure, and she felt silly for complaining about her dysfunctional but non-abusive family.

"No it's just I... I've never told anyone that."

"Well I'm glad you told me," she squeezed his hand and looked him in the eye. She was touched that he felt comfortable enough with her to open up like that. She knew he kept a lot of things bottled up. She also knew he had taken the brunt of it from Lonnie to protect Will. "You don't have to tell me that stuff, if you don't want to. But I'll always listen if you do, okay?"

"I know. Thanks."

"Hello mr. Bun-Bun how are you?" Holly suddenly interrupted, breaking the tension.

"I am very well Kenny, how are you?" Jonathan immediately played along, putting on a higher voice for the stuffed bunny in his hand as Holly held up Kenny the dog against him. Nancy couldn't stop grinning.

They continued playing with Holly for the rest of the afternoon, with a stop for a juice and banana break which went over smoother than

usual after Jonathan managed to convince Holly of the fruit's tastiness by snatching one of the pieces Nancy had cut up for Holly and making some extraordinary yummy-noises as he ate it. In the early evening both of their brothers came in with Dustin, Lucas and Max in tow.

"Hey, did mom and dad leave?" Mike asked as they all stood in the doorway to the living room.

"Yep."

"Huh, I thought they'd take Holly with them?"

"I did too. But apparently it wasn't 'that kind of trip'. Think about that for a minute."

"I'd rather not," Mike answered and made a disgusted face. "Hey can we have a sleepover?"

"I guess, have you guys called your parents?"

"No," or variants of it, were the collective response.

"Well, do that first. Then we can order pizza."

That got all the kids scrambling towards the phone in a hurry.

After gathering for the pizza in the kitchen with them the kids disappeared down to the basement where they'd spend the rest of the night.

"I want to see movie!" Holly proclaimed after they'd stowed away the dishes in the sink.

"Okay, what movie?" Nancy asked.

"Muppets!"

"Okay, if you brush your teeth first we can watch it," Nancy answered, knowing that Holly would never stay awake for the whole movie. "And you know what? Jonathan hasn't seen your Mickey Mouse pyjamas, want to show him?"

"Yes!"

"Okay, let's go get ready!" Turning to Jonathan she continued. "Could you get the VCR going? I think the movie's on the shelf."

"Sure," he smiled and went to prepare the movie while Nancy helped Holly brush her teeth and change into her pyjamas.

Nancy turned off the lights in the living room as they came back to further trick Holly into sleep eventually. She settled next to Jonathan on the couch while Holly ran to retrieve Kenny off the floor. Holly then quickly climbed onto the couch, pressing herself in between them.

"Ready?" Jonathan asked and picked up the remote.

"Yes," Holly answered as she snuggled deeper into the couch and him. Nancy found a blanket to cover them all.

Holly lasted a little over half of the movie before she fell asleep. They let the movie finish before taking her to bed, Jonathan carrying her upstairs.

"Think I'm not the only Wheeler girl with a thing for you," Nancy said as they closed the door behind them after exiting Holly's room.

"Maybe it's biological," he teased.

"Well. Now it's my turn to play with you."

She grabbed his hand and dragged him down the hall to her room at the opposite end. Her parents were away, her sister sound asleep and there were two floors between them and their brothers. They could take it slow and have their fun.

xxx

Thanksgiving goes just as she predicted. That is, until someone calls just as they've finished dinner.

"Wheeler residence."

"Hey Nancy, it's Joyce."

"Hi! Happy Thanksgiving!"

"You too. I hope I'm not interrupting..."

"God no! What's going on?"

"Well uh, I don't want to intrude on your holiday but if you and your brother have the time you're very welcome to come over now. There's someone here who wants to see you both..."

"Oh," she understood immediately. "Thanks, I'll talk to mom!"

"Give her my best!"

"Will do, bye!"

"Bye."

She returns to the table.

"So that was Mrs. Byers, she wanted to wish us a happy Thanksgiving."

"Oh that's nice of her!"

"... and she said that I could come over if I wanted, so can I? Oh and Mike too, Will's got something to show him I think."

"Well I suppose if she invited you... yes. But oh you can't come emptyhanded," her mother quickly decided and soon shoved a pecan pie in her hands.

"Thanks mom!" She stood up and gave her mom a hug for good measure.

"Yeah, thanks mom," Mike repeated as he stood up.

"So what's going on?" Mike asked in the car on the way over to the Byers.

"You'll see."

The Chief's cruiser in the driveway must've at least given him an

inkling but the look on Mike's face as they went inside and saw El was still priceless.

"He burnt the turkey," El explained after they all had exchanged seasons greetings, shooting a look at Hopper, making everyone laugh.

"Well you do it next year then and see how easy it is," he countered. "Thanks again Joyce. And Jonathan, for the food," he added.

"No problem, happy to have you," Joyce smiled.

"Same thing next year I'll bet," Jonathan muttered.

"A new tradition," Nancy smirked and leaned into his side.

They gathered in the kitchen for the pecan pie they brought and a pumpkin pie by Joyce's making.

"So El, do you like Thanksgiving?" Nancy asked.

"Yes! The food is nice. And... I like that you all are here."

"We like that too," Mike answered.

"Yeah thanks so much for calling," Nancy turned to Joyce.

"Oh of course!"

"When does... the giving thanks happen?" El asked hesitantly.

"Oh uh, now if you want to," Joyce answered.

"I am thankful for you, El. That you came back," Mike was quick to start.

"I think we all are," Hopper added and everyone chimed in with affirmatives.

"I am thankful for you... all of you," El said and looked shyly around the table.

"I think we all can agree on that too," Nancy said and everyone nodded.

Then it was time for *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving* so they all gathered in the living room. Nancy snuggled up with Jonathan in an armchair while Mike and Eleven sat next to each other on the floor. Hopper settled on the couch next to Joyce and Will. Looking weirdly in-place, Nancy thinks.

Later as they're saying goodbye at the door, El and Hopper having just left, she leans in closer to Jonathan.

"I think Mike and El summed it up nice before," she starts, looking down at their interlocked hands. "But most of all I'm thankful for you," she finishes, looking up at him.

"Same," he murmurs before kissing her goodnight.

A/N: Thanks so much for all the response! Next chapter might be a while 'cause I'm busy busy busy this week but here's some Holly-day fluff!

12. I'm sorry, I miss you, I love you

The steel handle on the cemetery gate is absolutely freezing in the November cold. She digs her hand deep into her coat pocket as soon as she's through and can release her grip. She silently thanks her mother for nagging about not forgetting to bring gloves if she was going outside, though she's starting to question her decision to just take the fingerless white ones as the cold's biting into her fingers on her right hand that's clutching the flowers. She couldn't take their car today and Jonathan was at work so he couldn't drive her. So she'd made the trek from home to the florist to the cemetery by foot. In a way she didn't mind though, it gave her more time to think. To prepare. This would be her first time visiting Barb's grave.

She walked and walked through the rows of headstones, Barb's being at the far end of the cemetery. She hadn't seen another soul so far so she was almost taken aback when she saw someone standing right near Barb's grave. Oh God, was it Mrs. Holland? She wasn't sure she would be able to handle that today as well. She considered waiting until the woman left but as she stepped closer she saw that it wasn't Barb's mother but someone else she recognized, and she wasn't standing at Barb's grave but the one next to it. Joyce was visiting Bob's grave. Buried a week apart here they lay next to each other forever, victims of the Demogorgon. Or, well, she knew Barb's plot was empty, she wasn't actually sure about Bob's. If there was anything left of his body she guessed that Hopper would've gotten it out of the Lab later, but was there anything left?

Pushing the thought away she quietly approached Barb's grave. Joyce was looking down at Bob's headstone and hadn't noticed her yet.

"Hey," she said in a low voice. Joyce abruptly looked up, shaken out of her thoughts unexpectedly.

"Hi," she relaxed when she saw who it was. Her eyes travelled down to the flowers in Nancy's hand and then to Barb's headstone. She nodded and then averted her eyes back to Bob's grave.

Nancy knelt down and placed the flowers on top of the headstone. In front of it numerous flowers sat in pots, she assumed Mr. and Mrs.

Holland were here every day. She had considered bringing a vase for hers, but ultimately decided against it. Knowing that the flowers would die gave her extra motivation to come back with new ones soon. Maybe Mrs. Holland would place them in water anyway, that was fine.

She looked up at Joyce, not sure how to phrase what she wanted to say but it turned out she didn't need to, Joyce understood what she thought, nodding again and walking away, giving her privacy. Nancy took a deep breath as she turned back towards Barb's headstone.

She'd thought about it all the way over, what she would do. She'd found a psychology book in the school library that amongst other things talked about grief and it said that for some people it was a good idea to talk to the person you missed after they were gone. Since a death was never timely, and the feeling of things being left unsaid could be hard to shake. It was weird, talking to someone who wasn't there, but she felt she had to say some things out loud.

"Hi," she started, quietly. "Um... god this is weird. Barb. I... I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, about everything. I'm sorry that I made you come to the party. I'm sorry about the beer. I'm sorry I ditched you. I'm sorry I was such a shitty friend. You didn't deserve that. You deserved the best friend in the world because that's who you were. The best friend anyone could ever have. I-," she choked on her words, tears rolling down her cheeks freely now.

"I'm sorry you're... dead. I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry. I didn't know what was out there I'm sorry." She stops to wipe some tears away and collect herself somewhat before continuing. "I miss you. So much. I miss you every day. I miss talking to you. I miss you talking to me. I miss movie nights and sleepovers and studying in the library and getting ice cream at Robbo's... By the way I um... you were right, about Steve and everything. That wasn't me."

She had to pause again, collecting herself more. "But Steve turned out to be a decent guy actually. We're friends. But uh, Jonathan. You know, Byers. God why am I telling you this... I just miss talking to you about stuff so much... so uh, we're together. He's good, he's nice, he's helped me with... everything. You would've liked him. I'm sorry you're not here anymore. We would have so much to talk about, you

have no idea. I... yeah. I don't know what else to say. I'll be back real soon. I love you."

She got up and backed away from the grave slowly on shaky legs. Turning around she began to walk while wiping away tears. She blinked and looked up, surprised to see Joyce still there, standing a bit further away, out of earshot. As she approached Joyce enveloped her in a hug. She buried her face in her chest as Joyce wrapped an arm around her back while the other stroked her hair. She smelled of cigarettes and a subtle perfume, she felt like warmth and comfort.

"Was it your first time? Since the funeral?" Joyce asks carefully after Nancy eventually pulls away after God knows how long.

"Y-yeah," she answers, voice still a bit shaky though she felt a lot better.

"It was my second time."

Nancy nods.

"Let's go," Joyce declares gently and they walk out of the cemetery.

"Did you walk here?" Joyce asks as they're out the gate, looking around for another car.

"Yes," Nancy answers. She'd been so deep in thought on the way there she didn't even see Joyce's car in the parking lot, she now realizes.

"I'll give you a ride."

"Thanks."

As she gets in the passenger seat she looks at her watch. When Joyce turns the ignition she asks.

"Um, could I come home with you? I wanted to see Jonathan when he gets off work anyway."

"Of course," Joyce smiles warmly and drives off.

xxx

"Would you like some tea?" Joyce asks after they've taken their coats off.

"Yes please," she answers and follows Joyce into the kitchen.

The house is quiet with Jonathan at work and Will with his friends at her house. She sits down at the kitchen table while Joyce busies herself tidying up a bit while she's waiting for the water to boil. It soon does and she joins Nancy at the table with two cups.

"How do you feel?" Joyce asks.

"Better now, thanks."

"Good."

"I kept postponing it, going there. I just... couldn't. But then I felt like I couldn't keep avoiding it either."

"I understand."

"I talked to her. Barb, I mean. I've read that it could make you feel better."

"Did it work?"

"Kind of, I guess. I don't feel worse. It felt really weird, talking to a headstone. But it's been even weirder to not be able to talk to her at all."

Joyce nods. "Maybe I'll try that next time."

They sip the tea in silence for a second before Joyce decides to change the subject.

"So how's school going?"

"Good, it's good."

"Are people still...?" Joyce prods.

"Yeah but not as much. I know people still talk but they don't dare say much to me anymore. They kind of think I'm a psycho," she

chuckles slightly.

"I know that feeling," Joyce grins.

"Yeah I don't mind it. And people are kind of afraid of Jonathan since he beat up Tommy H. too so, people keep their distance."

"Yeah I guess I shouldn't approve of him fighting but in this case I will."

"It was my fault anyway, he was defending me."

"No it was those idiots fault."

"Yeah."

"Hey mind if I ask, have you thought about college?"

"No yeah, actually. I snuck in with Steve when the recruiters came and talked with the seniors. Columbia sounded really interesting."

"What do you want to study?"

"I've been thinking a lot about journalism, lately. After... you know."

"I think you'd be great at that."

"Thanks."

"Did you know that Jonathan's got his heart set on NYU since he was six?"

"Really? He's talked about NYU but... since he was six? What happened then?"

"Well I gave him a cheap polaroid camera for his birthday. He loved it. Then it was picture day at school. I remember it so vividly, he came home from school that day and was so excited, he couldn't stop talking, for once. He had seen the school photographer's camera and asked him about it and then apparently asked the guy a million questions-

"I remember that!" Nancy exclaimed as the faded memory came

flooding back to her. "Barb and I talked about it on the swings later. He was always so quiet, but that day. I think I heard him speak more that day than the rest of that year!"

Joyce laughed. "Anyway so he asked the guy how you become a photographer. The guy said you had to study and when Jonathan asked where he said NYU."

"Wow."

"Yeah. He'd never been so excited about anything so I went out and got him a proper camera the next day. It was used of course but still. He went everywhere with it until it broke and we got a new one," Joyce continued, leaving out the bit about how it broke, through Lonnie's doing.

"That's so sweet. Just a shame that he's always behind the camera though, never in the photo."

"Oh, you want pictures? I've got pictures, hang on!"

Joyce got up in a hurry and went digging in the living room, coming back with a photo album.

"Most of these are really old ones, I think it's mostly baby pictures."

"Oh that's fine!" Nancy giggled as they both poured over the album.

They were almost through it by the time they heard the front door open and his familiar voice call out.

"Hey mom I'll just grab something to eat real quick I'm going over to-" he cut himself off as he entered the kitchen and saw them. "Oh, you're here."

"Hi!"

"Hi. Well uh, forget what I was saying then. What are you doing?"

"Oh just looking at baby pictures of you," she answered, grinning.

"What?! Mom, come on..."

"What? You were a beautiful child."

"You really were. But why didn't you like Santa?" Nancy giggled and pointed to a photo of a four year old Jonathan sitting on some Mall Santa's lap looking absolutely miserable.

Jonathan just grumbled something about not being good with new people in response.

Joyce and Jonathan took care of dinner so Nancy insisted on at least doing the dishes, though Jonathan only budged enough to allow himself to be demoted to drying duty while she washed and Joyce smoked. All three of them wound up in front of the tv after that. Eventually it became time to pickup Will and drop off Nancy since it was a schoolnight.

"I went to Barb's grave today," she tells him in the car.

"Oh. How was it?"

"Okay. Weird. Hard. But uh, your mom was there, at Bob's grave, I mean. She helped."

Jonathan nodded.

"I think I'm going back again on Thursday."

"I can give you a ride then."

"I'd like that."

Another nod.

"She told me you decided on NYU when you were six."

"What? Oh. Well, yeah."

"I remember that day by the way, picture day. Boy were you chatty then!"

"Yeah yeah."

"By the way your mom's so cool. About us and everything."

"She left condoms on my pillow before you stayed over the second time."

"Yes, that was cool! You do realize most mom's would freak and not let their son's girlfriend stay the night, right?"

"Right."

"Plus would you have preferred her giving to us directly?"

"Oh God."

"Exactly, so she did it like that so it would be less awkward. Cool."

"Fine."

He pulled up to the curb outside her house.

"See you tomorrow."

She kissed him goodnight.

"Tomorrow."

She went inside while Jonathan waited in the car. She went to the basement to retrieve Will. She waited in the doorway until he was safely inside the car. She gave a small wave and they both waved back before Jonathan drove away.

13. We'll look out for each other

Early in December and they once again find Hopper waiting for them on the Byers front porch when they get home from school, just like he did a couple of weeks ago before the Snow Ball. Now he's not standing alone, but having a smoke together with Mrs. Byers. Nancy notes the bikes carefully leaned against the wall.

"Finally. Come on, we've got stuff to go through," Hopper is short and to the point as always as he stubs his cigarette out and walks inside. Joyce just smiles and greets them fondly.

Inside the kids are chattering away like never before, and she understands why. El is sitting on the couch between Mike and Will. Lucas and Dustin crouch on the floor in front of them and talk over each other. She smiles as she remembers Thanksgiving, how happy El had looked. How happy her brother had looked. Hope is ignited within her. She's here again, does this mean the Chief will let up even more?

"Okay, pipe down. Everyone's here now so listen up, like I said I'm not going to go through this twice," Hopper's booming voice quiets the room. Having the attention of everyone, he continues.

"Here's how things stand with the Lab: For now, they don't appear to be actively looking for Jane. I'm keeping in contact with Dr. Owens and I think we can trust him, somewhat, at least. He's gotten me a birth certificate and other documentation that makes Jane legally my daughter. He insists that we'll have to keep her hidden longer. But I've been keeping an eye on the rest of their operation. Safe to say that they've got bigger worries for now. This, coupled with the fact that you are driving me crazy with all the nagging about seeing your friends," he eyes El, who just stares back, determined. "Leads me to this compromise," he puts emphasis on the last word and again gives El a look.

"I will not let Jane out in public. She will stay in the cabin for now. But, with exceptions like these. I have talked with Joyce and we've decided that twice a week she will come here, and only here, where you will be able to spend time with her. Sound good?"

"Yes!" Mike and the rest of the kids chorus. El nods giddily.

"Alright. A couple of ground rules: 1) You will not tell anyone who doesn't already know her of her existence. No one. 2) You will not bring anyone who doesn't already know her here. 3) She will not go outside this house. 4) There will always be at least two of myself, Joyce, Nancy or Jonathan here during these visits. 5) No funny business. Understood?"

"Yes!" The boys chorus again.

"What's funny business?" El challenges.

"Understood?"

"Yes. Now the other thing," El answers.

"Right. You," Hopper looks straight at Nancy for the first time since they walked inside. "You've ever tutored before?"

"Uh, yeah, some."

"Good. Our goal is for Jane to be out in public in the summer and start school in the fall. She insists on going with these knuckleheads which means she has to catch up. You want to help her with that?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Hey, I can help her!" Mike protests.

"Yeah me too, we're smart!" Dustin adds.

"Uh-uh. I want her learning, not playing around. Does Wednesdays work for you?"

"Sure."

"Good. Start next week."

And that's how it starts, what soon feels like a new normal for her, for them, for their entire weirdly connected monster hunting family. Twice a week El and Hopper is at the Byers. Her brother spends five

days a week bouncing against the walls in anticipation. And once a week she heads into the forest to Hopper's cabin with her or Mike's old books under her arm.

El is smart and a fast learner. She usually brings stuff for two subjects at a time, so they can switch around. El quickly shows aptitude for Math, and she finds it easy to teach, as there's always a definitive right or wrong answer. El is eager to learn everything though, and she wants to help her with it all. One day as they're finishing up a session she turns to El and asks her something she's been wondering since the last time El was at the Byers house. Joyce was working but she and Jonathan had been there along with Hopper and the kids.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yes?" The younger girls perks up.

"Do you... not like Max?"

The look on El's face confirm her suspicion even before she answers. The redheaded girl had come along with Lucas, but as far as Nancy could tell El had barely acknowledged her presence and it had felt awkward.

"No," she finally answers straightforwardly.

"Why not?"

"I like Mike, and Dustin and Lucas. And you and Jonathan. And Joyce and Hop. And Steve Hair-rington."

Nancy tried to hide a smirk at the way El pronounced that last name. Steve had been around with Dustin to the Byers and Nancy suspected that it was him or even her own little brother that had supplied her ex-boyfriend with that nickname.

"Thanks. I like you too. But liking us doesn't have anything to do with not liking Max?"

El squirmed at that. Nancy started to get an inkling of what was bothering El.

"Is it... since she wasn't here last year, do you... not like that the boys made friends with her while you were away?"

El didn't say anything but gave a slight nod in response.

"You're afraid that they were moving on?"

"Yes."

"I understand but... you do know that there was no way they were ever going to forget about you? I mean, Mike called you for..."

"353 days."

"Right. And I'm sure Dustin and Lucas didn't forget either. There's no way anyone could forget anyone as awesome as you."

El smiled shyly at that.

"Max is just a new friend they made. And she's done nothing wrong, you know she just moved here and was alone with no friends, that's no fun. And she could never replace you, no one could. But I think she's pretty cool. And I think she thinks you're really cool."

"I'm sorry."

"You don't have to say sorry to me! But maybe you can try and talk with Max next time?"

El nods again.

Next week El excitedly tells her that she apologized to Max and that Max helped her beat Dustin on the Atari.

xxx

Walks in the woods have turned into a regular thing for them. It's nice, it's quiet and just the two of them so they continue with it despite the fact that fall turned into winter some time ago which meant the leaves on the ground was replaced by snow and instead of Jonathan's hand enveloping hers she hooked her arm through his and dug her hands into her coat pockets.

"What are you getting Will for Christmas?" She asks.

"A new Walkman. He's just got my old one now and it's no good and... I feel bad that he just gets my hand-me-downs. It's enough with the clothes and everything."

"That's nice. But I think he likes to get your stuff too. Don't feel bad."

He shrugs.

"What are you getting Mike?"

"I don't know. Is it too big sister-y to get him like a really nice deodorant or something? I think he needs to clean up a bit now that he sort of has a girlfriend."

"Should I take that as a hint?" He smirks.

"No, shut up!" She protests and then quietly adds "You smell nice," making him blush and look away.

"So uh, we're having people over on the 23rd," she continues. "My mom wanted me to invite you, I mean all three of you. I think Lucas and Dustin and their families are coming also. And Mike wants me to help convince Hopper to let Eleven come. So. It would be nice. I mean, if you don't have plans or-"

"No! No, I mean, yeah it'd be nice. I'll tell mom."

"Cool."

"Yeah."

They walk in a comfortable silence for a while. The snow starts falling again. Jonathan stops to take some pictures. It's a beautiful scene, she knows it is. But for her the falling snow and the trees reminds her of something else.

"Do you think it's over?" She asks as he's putting away his camera.

He looks at her and she hooks her arms through his and starts walking again. She knows she doesn't have to specify any further, he

understands.

"No," he answers after thinking about it.

"Me neither," she agrees. "Like... El closed the gate. But the Upside Down is still there and if she could open the gate in the first place... maybe something else can as well?"

"Yeah."

"And what if there's other dimensions too?"

"I know."

"Plus the Lab... Okay, so the article is working and God, Hopper's even letting up a bit with Eleven but still... How deep does it go? Was it just Hawkins Lab that did shit like that? What if they've got other labs in other towns with other experiments? And what, will they just leave us alone now?"

"We'll look out for each other. And we can get at them again."

She looks at him. He's got that look of quiet determination again that she knows. And loves.

"I know. I love you."

"Love you too."

xxx

As Christmas nears they all ambush Hopper when he's brought El around to the Byers.

"What are you doing for Christmas?" Mike demands.

"Don't know yet."

"What? Come on! Where will you be?" Dustin asks.

"The cabin."

"That's no fun. Do you even have a tree?" Lucas pipes in.

"There's isn't room for one! Maybe I'll snag some decorations from the station."

"You should come to us on the 23rd," Nancy buts in. "We're having a party."

El, who's been watching the exchange in silence, lights up at that. The boys have been getting more and more excited about Christmas and of what she remembers from last year when Hopper had just recently taken her in and from what the television has taught her, she can't wait for it but would like to spend it with Mike and her friends, not just Hopper the whole time this year, even if Christmas Eve in the cabin is cozy.

"A party full of people, arranged by your mother who doesn't know any of this and I guess still believes that Jane is a Russian spy? No way."

"It's not going to be a lot of people, just these guys and their families and some neighbors, basically. And my parents don't have to know," Nancy continues her argument before Mike can start fighting for it.

"How so?"

"Mike managed to hide her in the basement for a week last year, I think we can do it one more night, especially when mom is preoccupied with the party. The boys always hide out in the basement during the parties anyway, we can just sneak her in there, I can run interference upstairs and if anyone else should come down there, which no one ever does, they can just hide her in the bathroom or something."

"I'll help upstairs," Joyce, who's been standing by quietly watching, adds.

"Uh yeah, me too," Jonathan chimes in.

Hopper is about to protest but then looks over at El, who looks so hopeful and excited, and just sighs.

"Fine. In the basement, the whole time. And you make sure no one else sees her. And you'll radio me at the slightest problem, I'll be

close by."

The boys whoop and cheer in celebration.

xxx

A day later Mike knocks frantically on her bedroom door while she's studying.

"I gotta get her a gift!"

"Yes, you do."

"Oh God, what should I get her? It's gotta be perfect and awesome!"

"Mike, chill. What does she like?"

"Uh, Eggos, Anne of Green Gables, Nancy Drew, punk rock, TV and pretty things."

She considers the comprehensive list for a second.

"You should get her something pretty."

"What?"

"Because you said it, she likes pretty things. All the other stuff you said she's already got from somewhere else. I know Jon's working on a new punk mix for her. She's got TV in the cabin. I've already given her every Nancy Drew book there is. And you can't just get her Eggos. Plus, she deserves something nice and pretty."

"Fine, but what?"

She gets up off the bed with a sigh and marches out of her room and into his, with Mike on her heels.

"What are you-" he starts as she digs around in the spot she knows is the right one, because of course she knows where he keeps his piggy bank just like he knew where hers was. She smashes it open before he can get to her.

"Hey!"

Ignoring her little brother she counts all the coins.

"Yeah this'll do, a real sizeable amount you've got there," she teases, shoving all the coins into his hands. "Put this in your pocket and grab your coat, we're going out."

"I was saving that for the Arcade," he mutters in the car.

"Mike, priorities."

"Right, fine."

When they get to the mall she drags him into every shop that sells accessories and/or cheap but nice jewelry. They're working on a budget and it's for a kid, after all. Mike grumbles and looks a bit lost looking around.

"Hey, you've gotta pick it out."

"Why? You're better with this stuff than I am."

"Of course I am but it's your present. Pick something out, I'll tell you if it's good or not."

After a couple of misfires (no Mike, not a headband. No Mike, diamonds are out of your price range) he eventually finds a nice bracelet which she readily confirms is nice and something El would probably love.

"Hey can you take the money and pay for it?"

"Grow the hell up, Mike," she answers and shoves him towards the register before stepping away. She then has the pleasure of watching Mike's face get beatred when the overly cheery cashier with no sense of boundaries curiously asks him if it's for his special someone.

She tutors El the next day.

"You give presents at Christmas," the girl states matter-of-factly after a while.

"Yes?"

"I want to give Mike a Christmas present."

"Oh, okay. Do you know what?"

"Yes. Uncanny X-Men #188 Legacy of the Lost. The latest issue. Dustin said to Mike that it is awesome and Mike said he wanted it."

"Wow," is all she can reply as she considers just how intently Eleven listens to Mike. "He'll love it," she eventually adds.

Eleven nods seriously.

"I want to buy it."

She's not sure how she ended up with the role of Christmas Elf but of course she helps El. Together they run a fierce campaign on Hopper who eventually relents and in similar fashion to their Snow Ball preparation drives them to a mall in another town where they find a comic book store and the right issue.

xxx

The 23rd rolls around eventually and people start arriving. The Sinclairs and some other neighbors are the first to arrive, then Dustin and his mom. Nancy's volunteered herself to greet people and take coats just so she knows exactly when Jonathan and the rest of the Byers arrive.

She's wearing a red dress and her hair up and when they do arrive, after they've all exchanged seasons greetings Jonathan can't take his eyes off her and starts to stammer something about how she looks. She's quite pleased by that reaction, but eventually smacks him on the arm to snap him out of it. His mother's watching, very amused by the look of it.

They've got a whole plan with regards to Eleven so when Mike interrupts her chatting with Jonathan she's not annoyed. Mike's been waiting in the basement for the last half hour at least with his Super-Com which El now has signalled meaning they're soon outside. So it's time to set the plan in motion. First they discreetly notify Joyce who nods and immediately strikes up a conversation with her mom and Mrs. Sinclair. Next they send Dustin in who starts a loud conversation

trying to engage everyone in the living room in a lively debate about the best Christmas movie. Lucas and Will runs interference between the living room and kitchen making sure no one is going out towards the hall. Finally she sends Jonathan in, armed with his camera to get people to commit to pose for photographs, further distracting them. She sends Mike down to the basement with the Super-Com again because she doesn't trust him or El to be sufficiently quiet upstairs.

She stands ready at the door and opens it quickly when she hears the quiet knock. She smiles widely at the girl but puts a finger to her lips. El grins and clamps up. She puts a hand on El's shoulder and leads her, still in her coat and all, to the basement stairs as quickly and quietly as possible but there's really no need for their tiptoeing, they can hear loud chatter and laughter from all the rooms and no one's paying attention to them.

Mike's waiting eagerly at the bottom of the stairs as they descend them, grinningly like an idiot at El who grins back. Since Mike can't move his gaze from El she takes the Super-Com from him and signals to Hopper that it all worked out.

"Okay, I'm gonna go back upstairs, I'll send the boys down. But uh, I got you this," she takes out a wrapped gift she stashed down here earlier and holds it out to El. "Merry Christmas."

El takes it and opens it with great care. It's a snow globe. El just stares at it, intently studying the small house within.

"Uh, try shaking it," she instructs.

El looks up at her and then takes her advice and shakes it furiously.

"That's probably enough," she hastily adds.

El stops and holds up the snow globe again and looks mesmerized by it.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll see you guys later."

She makes her way up the stairs and tries to open door, but is met

with resistance so she gathers her strength and pushes it open hard. Now it flies open but then firmly connects with something. Or someone, as she hears a yelp and a thud. Getting the door fully open she finds Dustin laying on the ground with Lucas and Will laughing at him and even Jonathan smirking in the background.

"Ouw," Dustin complains and rubs his forehead that's turning slightly red.

"Sorry!" She gives Dustin a hand and helps him up.

"I told you not to stand too close to the door," Lucas admonishes.

"You okay?" She asks.

"Never better, Nance," the curlyhaired boy smiles, apparently now recovered.

"Whatever, can we go downstairs now?" Lucas cuts in.

"Yeah, sure," she answers and moves out of the way. The trio of boys bounds down the stairs while she shuts the door behind them.

She turns to Jonathan.

"So, how you liking the party?"

"Oh you know me, can't get enough of these things," he jokes.

"You've survived my mom and dad so far?"

"Yep, but that's mostly 'cause I've been hanging with Holly and Erica."

"Well they might be the It Crowd at this party so well done for nestling your way in there," she teases.

She grabs him by the arm and leads the way into the living room to continue mingling. She's on her best behaviour to get on her mother's good side ahead of new year's, which she of course plans to spend with Jonathan and not with her family who will be going to visit her aunt.

"So uh, do you want to do presents tonight or...?" Jonathan asks later when they have a moment of privacy.

"I don't know, I kind of want to wait," Nancy smiles. "Could I maybe come over for a bit on actual Christmas? Just for a bit though, mom will kill me if I miss dinner."

"Yeah, yeah of course!"

"You sure? I don't want to intrude..."

"Intrude?" Joyce happens to pass by and picks up that word. "Sorry, what's going on?" She asks softly.

"Can Nancy come over for a bit on Christmas?" Jonathan asks, knowing what the answer will be but wanting Nancy to hear it as well.

"Of course! Sweetie, we'll be happy to have you. I've said it before, you're always welcome!"

"Thanks, Mrs. By-, Joyce."

The rest of the party goes smoothly as well, though she thinks it's embarrassingly noticeable how tipsy her mom gets eventually, even if she doesn't create a scene or anything. Eventually it's time to sneak El back out as Hopper is waiting so she goes down to the basement to break it up.

They're all sitting around the table, on it is a huge pile of the Christmas cookies and candy her mother prepared. The other three boys seems to be engaged in the debate on the best Christmas movie which Dustin apparently took with him down here. Mike seems transfixed by Eleven, who in turn seems to go back and forth between Mike and the candy.

"Sorry guys but Hopper's waiting and we gotta get El out of here before anyone notices."

They all moan but get up. El comes over and proudly extends her arm which is now sporting the bracelet.

"Look!"

"Wow, that looks really good on you! Did you have fun tonight?"

"Yes, really fun."

"Good, I'm glad," she smiles at the younger girl who smiles wide with the corners of her mouth dark with chocolate, clutching the snow globe in one hand. "Okay listen up guys, remember our strategy. Jonathan and Joyce is up there now, they've got the kitchen covered. You three," she points to Will, Dustin and Lucas, "cover the living room, I'll take the hall and Mike, you walk Eleven to Hopper's car, he's parked outside Lucas' house."

"Gotcha," Lucas affirms as El puts on her coat.

"Wait, Eleven," Dustin begins, then scoops up the remainder of the candy on the table. "You should have this, I doubt the Chief is as good a baker as Mrs. Wheeler," he finishes and gives El the candy, who swiftly puts it all in her coat pockets.

"Thank you."

They all say Merry Christmas to El before bounding up the stairs, Nancy goes last and then knocks on the basement door to signal to Mike and El that the coast is clear. She shoves Mike's coat in his hands as they come up and then sneak out the front door.

Mike manages to get back inside before their mother notices his absence.

"We good?" She asks as he hangs up his coat again.

"Yeah."

"Did you kiss her goodnight?" She teases.

"Ew, gross."

"Uh-huh, well I do recognize the lipstick I leant El..." she says before turning around and walking away to find Jonathan. Mike promptly wipes at his lips.

A/N: I'm back! Originally I was writing one Christmas chapter but had to split into two so this is Christmas preparations, Christmas will come next and then new years. Thanks so much for all the reviews, follows and all so far!

14. Just too cozy

Christmas morning comes. Holly wakes everyone with a loud announcement of what day it was. Her mother makes coffee for herself and dad and cocoa for them (she normally prefers coffee now but it's a nice tradition). Her father settles in his chair as usual while her mother runs between the kitchen and living room to both get started on breakfast but not missing precious family time. Nancy and Mike follow Holly to the tree and she sorts out the presents before Holly can claim them all.

She gets perfume and some new eye shadow and mascara from their parents, and thanks them for it. Mike gets a new notebook for his campaigns and some comic book that she knows is the wrong one but he hides his disappointment since El got him the right one. He rolls his eyes at her gift to him but she just gives him a pointed look. She receives a Wonder Woman comic in return from him.

"I know you're not into comics but... I mean she's badass. And you've kind of become... not the worst," he mumbles.

"Thanks, weirdo," she smirks. She's actually really touched by it.

Most of the presents are for Holly of course, who gets a flurry of new toys and stuffed animals. Finally they each open their gifts from their grandma. The packages are all suspiciously similar in size, weight and feel. Their fears are confirmed when inside they find three matching knitted sweaters.

"Good God," Mike mutters.

"At least we only have to wear them when she comes and visits," Nancy reasons.

"Still."

"Alright, time for breakfast!" Their mother claps her hands together and they all get up and head for the kitchen.

"Okay I'm going over to the Byers," Nancy announces after breakfast.

"Alright dear, just make sure you're back in good time before dinner, they said that the snow will pick up in the afternoon."

"Yes mom, I will," she answers before running upstairs to get Jonathan's gift. She pulls on her coat and puts on a hat and heads out to the car.

She drives at low speed since the road glistens from the ice that was formed during the night as the temperature first rose and then fell again, melting snow and then freezing over again. She gets there alright though.

"Merry Christmas!" She greets Joyce who opens the door.

"Hi sweetie, merry Christmas!" Joyce gives her a hug and shows her inside.

Jonathan gets up from the couch where he's been sitting next to Will, watching his little brother play Atari.

"Merry Christmas," he smiles and kisses her on the cheek, still shy about public display of affection even in his own house.

"Merry Christmas," she smiles back. "Hey Will, merry Christmas!" She waves to the younger boy who has paused his game.

"Hi Nancy! Merry Christmas."

Joyce disappears into the kitchen and returns with tea and cookies. Will shows her the Walkman he got from Jonathan.

"And mom got me Pitfall II! It's awesome! But it's only single player though."

"Cool! What did you get?" She asks Jonathan.

"Mom got me this shirt," he answers, gesturing to the olive shirt he's wearing.

"Nice," she turns to Joyce, "I've told him, green's a good color on him."

"I know! Just getting him out of black is a challenge though."

"Yeah yeah," Jonathan interrupts. "And I'm still waiting on this guy's gift," he continues, ruffling Will's hair.

"Hey, I told you I was waiting for a reason! But now you can get it, hang on."

Will disappears down the hall and into his room.

"So what did you get?"

"Some makeup and stuff from mom and dad, and a Wonder Woman comic from Mike."

"Really?"

"Yep, it was really sweet actually. He said she's badass and I'm not the worst, so."

"Can't argue with that."

Will returns, suddenly looking nervous.

"So uh, this might be lame," he begins as he stands, holding something behind his back.

"Come on buddy, nothing you get me is lame," Jonathan protests.

"Well uh it's weird and, I-, yeah, okay. Well uh, so I wanted to wait until Nancy got here because this is kind of... well I made this," he eventually gets out and holds out a rolled up sheet of paper. Jonathan smiles and takes it, unfurling it on the coffee table that Joyce and Nancy hurriedly clears.

It's a drawing, a large drawing on a big sheet of paper. And it's them, Nancy and him. He with his camera around his neck and a bear trap in one hand and the spiked bat in the other, shoulder to shoulder with Nancy who's clutching a gun in one hand a tape recorder in the other. Determined expressions on both of their faces. Behind them a shadowy version of Hawkins Lab lures.

He just stares at it and he can see Nancy in the corner of his eye just as captivated by it. It's not until that Will opens his mouth again that he's shaken out of it.

"I don't know if it's lame or- I just, everything you told me about what you did... both times, and what the guys have told me I just, it's really cool and sorry if it's weird that I drew you guys I-"

"Will," he stops his brother and looks him right in the eye. "This is the coolest present I've ever gotten."

"Yeah, this is amazing," Nancy concurs, barely taking her eyes off it to look at Will who smiles shyly.

"Really?"

"Yes, really, come here," Jonathan answers and pulls his brother into a hug. As soon as he releases him Nancy embraces Will instead.

"Seriously Will, this is the coolest thing ever. It's not even fair how good you are at drawing."

"I'm putting this up in my room," Jonathan adds.

"And I'll steal it for mine," Nancy retorts.

"Stop..." Will blushes as he sits down.

Eventually they go to Jonathan's room to exchange gifts in private. Jonathan nervously fiddles with his hands in his pockets, which she finds way to adorable.

"Uh, I've made you this," he starts, pulling out a small rectangular gift out of his right pocket. "And uh, I got you this," he continues, taking out a slightly larger wrapped box out of his left pocket.

"Thank you," she takes both gifts from him and sits down on his bed and urges him to sit down next to her. He's quick to oblige.

She eagerly rips open the paper to the smaller gift first. It's a mix tape, of course.

"It's uh, there's some new stuff there that I hope you'll like. And some other stuff that we... I mean, that I know you like."

She smiles as she scans the track listing written on the back in Jonathan's messy handwriting. Sure enough Blue Bayou, You Better Go Now and Atmosphere are there. She also recognize Heroes. The rest are songs she doesn't know by bands she barely knows or doesn't know at all.

"Thank you, this is great," she kisses his cheek, before tearing into the other gift. She feels like a little kid but she can't wait to see what it is.

It's a box of ammunition.

"Sorry if it's weird I just thought-" he starts but she interrupts him with a kiss, almost laughing at his lips at how perfectly in sync they are.

"No this is great. I-, hang on."

She gets up off the bed and retrieves the bag she brought her gifts over in. Like him, she's got one small gift wrapped and one larger. She hands him the smaller one first and watches his eyes light up as he unwraps it to find film rolls within.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She hands him the larger gift. It's heavy, he notes as she sits down next to him again. He unwraps the box and finds lighter fluid and a small blade inside. He looks to her. She's looking at him with her doe eyes, he can see a smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

"Good thing we did this privately," he smirks.

"Yeah," she laughs, before stifling it. "But seriously... we're not paranoid, right?"

"No. We're just... ready. If anything happens."

"Yeah. By the way, did you buy it at the same place? As last year, I

mean."

"Yeah. You?"

"Yeah," thinking for a moment she continues. "We should just set up a tab there," she jokes.

"We should get a discount."

"Maybe the third can of lighter fluid is free?"

"Buy two bear traps, get the third one for free?"

She collapses against him in a fit of giggles and he feels himself unable to stop chuckling as the absurdity of the whole situation fully hits him. Here he is, exchanging gifts with his girlfriend and he got her bullets and she got him a knife and lighter fluid and they're both really happy with it.

"Merry Christmas, Nance," he says softly when they've both have calmed down.

"Merry Christmas," she answers and kisses him again.

The snow outside has started to pick up so she figures she should head home. They go out into the living room again where Will is playing his new game while Joyce sits in the couch, watching her son with a content smile.

"Hey, thanks for having me over but I should probably get back before mom freaks out."

"Thanks for coming sweetheart, drive safe," Joyce says as she gets up from the couch and hugs her.

"I will."

"Bye Nancy."

"Bye Will! I was serious about stealing that drawing by the way."

Will giggles as Jonathan follows her to the door where she pulls on

her coat, hat and scarf. Saying goodbye they part with a quick kiss. He stands in the doorway, watching as she makes her way to the car and starts it. Or well, tries to start it. Because it won't. As she turns the ignition the car only sputters and makes weird noises that even she with her limited knowledge knows it shouldn't make. Trying again and again gets the same result. Looking up she sees Jonathan pulling on his jacket and making his way through the snow that's really coming down now.

"Won't start?" He asks as she gets out of the car. She nods. He pops the hood and takes a look. "I'll get the jumper cables, hopefully that'll work." He goes to his car that's parked right in front of hers and retrieves the cables from the trunk.

"Car trouble?" Joyce asks, her and Will appearing in the doorway.

"Yeah, we're gonna try and get a jump on it," Jonathan answers before getting in his car and with some difficulty due to the snow and small space manouver it around to get the hood pointing at her car so he can connect the cables.

"Damnit," they chorus as her car won't start even after Jonathan's effort with the jumper cables and multiple tries. He takes another look under the hood as the snow starts to cover them.

"Any idea what it could be?" She asks as she joins him.

"No, I'm not very good at this, just know from trial and error with my car."

She nods, briefly wondering how much in life Jonathan has had to learn that way to take care of himself and Will.

"Or wait, maybe this, I guess this shouldn't be leaking," he points.

"Guess not. D'you know how to fix it?"

"No. I mean, I guess we could work it out but I don't know. I can give you a ride, otherwise?"

"Hey, they're saying on the radio that the roads are slippery and starting to get covered in snow, and that it's going to be almost like a

light blizzard soon!" Will calls from the doorway.

"I don't want you guys out driving," Joyce, who's made her way over, says firmly.

Nancy looks around. She hadn't fully realized just how much the snow was coming down until now. She knows Joyce is right.

"But..." she begins. Mom will flip that she won't be home on Christmas Eve. And she doesn't want to overstay her welcome.

"No buts, come on. I'm sure Karen will feel the same, you shouldn't be out on the roads in these conditions. And you're more than welcome to stay with us," Joyce replies as if she's just read her mind, and leads them back inside.

"Thanks," she says as they're back in the warmth. "Can I use your phone?"

"Of course."

The Byers go into the kitchen and tries and fails to not eavesdrop on Nancy's phonecall.

"Hi mom, I... no, I'm still at the Byers... well have you looked outside? The roads aren't safe and... no I tried to leave earlier but the car wouldn't start... I don't know! Jonathan tried to fix it but it wouldn't start and then the snow... yeah exactly, Joyce said the same... well there's nothing you can do... I'll just stay here, Joyce has already... yes... yes, I will... it's not a big de-... yes... I'll see you all tomorrow, don't worry about it... bye."

Hanging up, she joins them.

"Sorry about this," Jonathan says.

"No I-, I don't mind staying with you guys. I just hope I'm not screwing up your plans."

"Sweetheart, you gotta stop that. We're happy to have you, and we always get leftovers anyway so food is not a problem," Joyce says.

"Yeah, it's impossible to get food for just three," Jonathan adds.

"Okay then," Nancy smiles.

It's still a bit too early to start on dinner though so they settle at the table with a deck of cards and Joyce teaches her gin rummy. If they were playing for money Joyce would clean them all out.

Joyce shoos them out of the kitchen as she's getting started on dinner. Nancy challenges Will to a Defender rematch on the Atari. Will readily agrees and digs out the cartridge as Jonathan sits down next to her on the couch. He watches with a slight smile on his face as they play for a while before he disappears. He returns with the video camera as Nancy takes her turn.

"Stop..." she rolls her eyes as he films her trying to concentrate on the game, and Will smirking behind her.

"Why?" He teases.

"You're making me lose my focus! Come on, come on stupid ali-, shit, damnit," she curses at the game as she loses.

"Language!" Joyce shouts.

"Sorry!" She apologizes quickly. She turns to Will who's giggling.

"Okay fine, you win."

"You and Mike get the same way when you lose," he notes.

"You take that back!" She immediately protests, eliciting a snicker from Jonathan.

xxx

After dinner they all collapse into the sofa and turn on the tv. Dinner was great, Joyce tried to make excuses for it but stopped after both she and Jonathan had assured her it was good. And it really was, it wasn't as big a spread as her mother always does, which is frankly completely over the top for a family of five, one of which a picky toddler.

They don't get up from the couch for the rest of the evening, it was just too cozy and they were too full. Eventually Will falls asleep sandwiched between Joyce and Jonathan so he carries him to bed. Joyce and Nancy are both yawning so they decide to take it as a cue for them all to turn in for the night.

"Comfy?" Jonathan asks as she snuggles into him in bed.

"Very."

After lying in silent and content for a while she opens her mouth again.

"Jon."

"Hm?" He had almost fallen asleep.

"I'm really glad my car wouldn't start."

"Me too."

"Your family rocks, you know that right?"

"I think so," he smirks.

"I do too," she answers before slowly drifting off to sleep.

xxx

After breakfast the next morning the two of them venture outside. The snow came down hard during the night as well, covering the driveway. They get two shovels from the shed and get to work clearing a path down to the road which they can only hope will be plowed later.

"They're probably plowing downtown now, will get out here last," Jonathan notes.

"No rush on my account," she answers.

He turns his back as he shovels the last portion of the driveway. She looks at all the snow on the sides and can't resist. Bending down she

picks some up and quickly molds it into a ball. One more look, ready, aim, fire.

Bullseye. Jonathan turns around as the snowball hits his shoulder.

"Oh you're on Wheeler."

"Bring it Byers, we both know who's got the better aim."

"We'll see about that," he comments as he bends down and makes his own snowball. He's better with this than a revolver, from years of playful snowball fights with Will.

No holds barred they both try to pummel the other with snowballs. It's an even fight but Nancy's quickness gives her an edge. Eventually she's got Jonathan cornered against the shed with a large ball in her hand.

"Do you surrender?" She asks, trying to hold back laughter.

"Hm..." he seems to hesitate. "Can we negotiate?"

"No, I take no prisoners!"

"That's a shame, Nance."

"Why's tha-" she's suddenly interrupted by a snowball hitting her in the back of the head, almost knocking her hat off. Turning around she sees Will a few yards behind her, grinning.

"Thanks, buddy!" Jonathan calls as he darts away.

"Goddamn brotherly love," she mutters as she flees, they've got her surrounded.

She dodges Will's next throw but Jonathan gets her instead. She's trying to decide on the best place to get some cover when a flash of red in the corner of her eye grabs her attention. Joyce has joined them. Or more accurately it seems, joined the fight on her side as she launches a snowball straight at her eldest.

"Mom!"

"Sorry honey but I'm on her side!"

"And we'll crush you!" Nancy adds.

"Jonathan! Rendezvous at Castle Byers!" Will calls.

"Good idea buddy!"

Will and Jonathan take off into the forest. Nancy and Joyce lets them go get a headstart while they load up on ammunition.

"You know where it is right?"

"Of course I do, it's about halfway between here and Hopper's cabin."

"Okay, lead the way!"

As they near it Nancy stops and looks at the ground to see if they can discern anything from the foot prints, but no they're scattered going off in all kinds of directions.

"They worked to cover their tracks," she notes.

"Clever boys."

She catches a glimpse of Jonathan's hat outside the "Castle".

"You go on, I'll circle 'round and we'll have them surrounded," Nancy decides.

She goes around and gets a clear shot on Jonathan who's focusing on Joyce, and she connects squarely with a ball. He shrugs it off and slowly turns around.

"We've got you surrounded. Surrender now or-" Wait, she realizes something. Will is missing. She looks at Jonathan, he's got a smirk on his face. He glances upwards and nods. She follows his gaze and looks up and is promptly showered in snow cascading from the tree branch directly above her that's shaking wildly. Will's laugh rings out as he jumps out of the tree and runs away with Jonathan further into the forest, with Nancy and Joyce hot on their tail.

The battle rages on unhindered. That is, until Joyce misses Jonathan with a ball but it's a direct hit on someone else behind him. Hopper slowly turns around. He's got El next to him and there's a snowman in front of them.

El looks both happy and bewildered as she looks between them all. Hopper narrows his eyes.

"Joyce Byers... still got your old ways in ya, huh," he remarks and to Nancy's surprise quickly makes a snowball and flings it at Joyce.

The fight is reignited again, Hopper stepping in on the boys side so Nancy quickly recruits El to theirs. She shows El how to make a snowball. The younger girl's questions about how this relates to the Snow Ball she puts a pin in for another day.

They fight on equal terms for a while, El squealing with delight every time she gets in a hit on Hopper, who's a rather big target to aim at. But then the boys start to get the upperhand so Nancy starts to encourage El to just slightly use her powers, stopping some balls in the air and making the snow gathered on tree branches crash down at every opportunity.

"No fair, she's got powers!" Will protests.

"All's fair in war!" Nancy retorts.

It gets to the point where El eventually gathers enough snow to cover all three of Will, Jonathan and Hopper and holds it in the air above them.

"We've gone nuclear," Nancy declares. "Surrender or be destroyed."

The three guys look between themselves.

"Fine," Jonathan huffs, stifling a grin.

El sets the snow down in place again.

They all head back to the Byers house, Hopper and El joining them, to warm up with some hot cocoa. When they've finished they go outside and Hopper takes a look at her car. Assessing the situation he

deems it in need of a proper mechanic.

"I can get the tow truck to come out later to get it," he says.

"Thanks."

Then they see the blinking lights of the plough car clearing the road.

"I suppose I should get home then," Nancy sighs.

"I'll drive you, Jonathan states.

She hugs both Joyce and Will goodbye, thanking them again.

They get in his car and drive off.

"Just so you know, we would've beaten you even without El."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, really. I'm so much faster than you. And your mom is just a machine out there."

"No match for the Byers brothers brains."

"Big woop, your little brother is good at hiding while you're a sitting duck."

They continue their playful bickering until he pulls up outside her house which is covered in decorations as usual.

"See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

She can't think of anything more to say, after everything. Well, one more thing.

"I love you."

"Love you too," he answers before kissing her.

She exits the car and walks to the door. Turning around she smiles

and waves before going inside. He drives home with a smile.

15. Resolutions and reveals

They don't really have a plan for New Year's Eve. No invitation to Tina's New Year's Bash, not that either of them had wanted to go anyway. He comes by to drop Will off, with some backing from Nancy Mike had managed to convince their mother of letting him have his friends over for a sleepover instead of getting dragged along to aunt Mary's where their parents and Holly would be spending New Year's. Hopper had let El come over so she could celebrate with the others. Steve had driven Dustin over and after a quick explanation of "I have nothing better to do" had remained in the basement.

"So do you have your New Year's resolution?" Nancy asks him in the car as they take off down Maple Street.

Steve's arrival meant that they didn't feel the need to babysit the kids (not that Mike would ever acknowledge that they ever needed it). Nancy had announced she had an idea of what they could do, ran up to her room, then into the kitchen, then yelled "Hey, we're going out, Steve's in charge, listen to him!" down the basement stairs before grabbing Jonathan and pulling him out to his car.

"Uh, not really."

"I figured, so I've got one for you!"

"What?"

"Your resolution will be to learn to hit the cans instead of the spaces between, and I'm going to help you," she explains, brandishing the gun she'd stuffed into her bag.

"Is that so?" He chuckles.

"Yes! Like I've said, you've got terrible aim with a gun but great with a camera, so I bet it's fixable."

"Guess we'll see," he laughs.

"Yes, we will. Thanks again for the Christmas present by the way," she puts a box of ammunition in her coat pocket and gives him a

peck on the cheek.

They drive out to the woods near his house and find the same place they'd been that November day. As she lines up the beer cans she'd brought Nancy thinks back to that day, to him telling her how his asshole of a father had forced him to kill a rabbit when he was ten, to her telling him about her parents loveless marriage and boring lives. To saying screw that and taking a shot. Looking back, that had been a monumental day. She thinks it might've been her first steps on her own path to become someone, who she wasn't sure, but at least someone different than her parents and everyone else. Herself. And it had been their first real steps toward each other.

"Okay so, when you aim with your camera you hold it like this, right?" Nancy pretends to hold up a camera in front of her face.

"Yes."

"But with a gun you aim it like this," she took out the gun and aimed it with straight steady arms.

"Yes."

"So the difference is that with a camera you bend your arms and hold the camera close to you and look through it, with a gun you straighten your arms, hold it away from you and have to look beyond it. So you got to practice holding your arms steady that way and to look further. Here."

She hands him the gun, he takes it and aims at a can. She studies his locked arms intently.

"Thumper relax, hold it steady," she blurts out without thinking.

"Thumper?" He asks, puzzled.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Shut up."

Her cheeks go red.

"Just focus, you can do this, just try to relax and keep your arms still. Now, read the can."

"What?"

"You've got to zero in on it close, your hands will coordinate with your eyes to adjust your sight, if you can read the text on it you've got focus."

"It says Budweiser. I recognize the label."

"Well shit, just try to focus on the B then, okay?"

"Yeah."

"Got it?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, shoot."

Woodchips fly out from the tree behind the cans as the bullet hits it. Birds flee from the treetops.

"Damnit."

"Hey that wasn't that bad. Try the next one. Oh hey, I've got it: take a deep breath as you lock your sight and hold it until you shoot."

More woodchips fly out.

"Shit."

"Again."

There's a 'ping' followed by a soft thud as the bullet hits the can and causes it to fall on the ground.

"Yes! Nice shot!" Nancy exclaims and kisses Jonathan who still looks shocked that he actually hit the target.

"I knew you could do it, get the other ones now," she encourages and Jonathan's shook out of it, and slowly gets the rest of the cans down.

"Great!"

"Yeah that... worked."

"Told you it would. Now lets go back, it's getting dark and it's freezing and I forgot my gloves."

They collect the cans and heads toward his house.

"Is your mom home?"

"Don't think so, she said she had plans."

"Really, what kind of plans?"

"Don't know, didn't ask."

"Well well, an empty house just for us..." She says in that voice that makes him blush.

They go in through the backdoor and she's already planting kisses on him as they come into the living room. They come to a halt in the doorway.

"Oh!" Nancy shouts and pulls away from Jonathan.

"Oh!" Joyce mirrors.

Hopper only mutters something as he slides away from Joyce on the couch. Jonathan doesn't get any words out at all.

"We uh... we'll be out of your hair, happy new year!" Nancy gets out as she tugs Jonathan away, clamping a hand over his mouth as he opens it to comment on the situation.

"Oh sweetie..." Joyce begins as Hopper uncomfortably looks around at the walls.

"No no, just... carry on," she pushes Jonathan out to the backdoor before finishing: "By the way you two are good for each other. Bye!"

"So that was her plans! Good for her," Nancy says as they walk to his car again.

"Good God," Jonathan returns.

"Hey, this will be good for her. And for him, frankly. He's really obvious."

Jonathan groans as he turns the ignition.

"Come on it's not really a surprise, they care about each other a lot."

"I guess."

"And he cares about Will."

"Yeah."

"And you," she adds with emphasis. "I think he'll make a great stepdad," she teases.

"Feel like I need a drink to unsee what I just saw," he mutters.

"Now that's a good idea. We'll go to my house then, if you don't feel like crashing a party?"

They go back to her house. They can hear faint sounds of the group in the basement as they head to the living room. Having retrieved the vodka bottle Murray gave them Nancy disappears into the kitchen to get something to water it down with, since they didn't save that bottle Murray gave them the same way. She returns with a bottle and two glasses and they settle on the couch.

"So is it still a New Year's Resolution if you make it happen early?" He asks after over an hour of drinking, talking, laughing and cuddling.

"Don't know," she giggles slightly.

"What's yours?"

"My what?"

"Resolution."

"Oh," she goes quiet and thinks for several moments. "Ooh, I've got it!"

She stands up, feeling the effects of vodka clearly, and looks around for his everpresent camera. It rests on his jacket on the floor. She snatches it.

"My resolution is to take a good picture of you for once," she declares as she removes the lens cap.

"Why?" He chuckles.

"Because it's no fair that you're always behind the camera so we don't have any good ones of you," she explains, fiddling with the buttons. "But you should probably help me with this part so I don't break it," she realizes and hands him the camera.

He laughs and adjusts the settings quickly before snapping a picture of her as she looks at him, eyes wide with a slight drunken fascination at him fiddling with the camera.

"Hey that wasn't the idea," she protests and takes the camera back.

He's for once not uncomfortable being in front of the camera, he's not sure if it's the alcohol or Nancy. Probably both. He can't keep from smiling as she looks through the lens and snaps off a couple of photos in quick succession before putting the camera down.

"That was good. You looked cute. You look cute. But we can't develop them tonight, right?"

"Right."

"So we won't know for sure until the new year but I bet my resolution's done as well."

"We're really time-efficient," he notes. She agrees and takes a drink.

They remain on the couch for the rest of the evening. A make out session goes pretty far, but doesn't lead to anything more, as Nancy

decides that her room upstairs is too far to walk when Jonathan's chest is this comfortable to lie on right here.

"So uh, Thumper?" He asks suddenly.

"Oh," she drums her fingers against his chest. " 'cause you're sweet and nice and cuddly," she explained. "Like a fluffy bunny," she adds, giggling and kisses his cheek that's going red.

"Okay..."

"But you can't call me Bambi."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"You can call me..."

"Nancy Drew."

"No!" She giggles.

"Yes! Though I might stick to Nance for short."

"Hm."

Eventually shouts of "Happy New Year" erupts from below which clues them in, time long forgotten about.

"Happy new year, Thumper," she giggles.

"Happy new year, Nancy... Drew," he smirks, before kissing her.

The party clambers out of the basement the next morning having talked Steve into making breakfast for them.

"Woah dude," Dustin says as they cut through the living room.

"Wow," Max agrees.

"Gross," is Mike's comment. El, Will, Lucas and Steve watch in silence.

Jonathan stirs and Nancy's eyes flutter open. He's slept on the couch,

and she on him. Thankfully both fully clothed. Glasses and the vodka bottle litter the coffee table.

"Morning," she almost whispers to him, head pounding.

"Morning," he replies, barely able to open his eyes in daylight. He can still taste the vodka.

"Morning," Steve and the kids cut in. Nancy looks up for the first time, eyes wide. She almost falls to the floor as Jonathan moves to see the source of the sound, but a secure hand he's got wrapped around her waist catches her in time.

"Oh god."

Somehow Steve makes them all come to the kitchen, where Nancy and Jonathan collapses down on a chair each at the kitchen table and both bury their faces in their arms on the table. The boys and El and Max joins them at the table with smug expressions while Steve starts cooking breakfast.

"So, how was your night?" Dustin is the one to start.

"Great," Nancy answers without looking up. Jonathan only grunts in agreement.

"Looks like it," Lucas grins.

"Hey, let this be a lesson to all of you little idiots, don't drink. Or at least not get that drunk, because the hangover's a bitch," Steve lectures from the stove.

"What's 'drunk'?" El asks.

"Oh, when people, uh people older than us, drink alcohol to have fun. Kind of. They did that last night. Too much, it seems," Mike answers.

"Oh. And what's 'hangover'?"

"This, basically," Mike gestures at his pitiful sister and her boyfriend.

"We didn't water it down enough," Nancy sighs. Jonathan again

agrees with a grunt.

"Yeah you guys really can't handle your alcohol. Here," Steve smashes down two plates of greasy fried eggs on the table, the loud noise jolting both Nancy and Jonathan. "Eat this," he disappears briefly and returns with two cups of black coffee. "And drink this."

They grumble but tucks in as Steve serves the others before joining them at the table.

"You're gonna be in so much trouble when mom and dad finds out," Mike gleefully informs Nancy.

"I will actually kill you dead if you tattletale," Nancy shoots him a look.

"Kidding?" El asks. She finds that knowing when people are joking or being serious is some of the hardest things to figure out about talking.

"Yeah, kidding," Nancy sighs, easing the girl's brief worry.

"I won't say anything if you do me a favour," Mike continues.

"What?"

"I haven't decided yet, but remember this."

Nancy groans.

"Hey if you don't come up with anything, I need one" Lucas interjects, "You know Keith who works at the Arcade right? He did me a favour a few months ago because I promised I'd get him a date with Nancy and now he's starting to get impatient and threatens to ban me from-" Lucas cuts himself off as he sees Nancy's narrowed eyebrows, Mike's disgusted look and Jonathan's death glare.

"Hey, is this Keith someone I need to talk to?" Steve asks.

"Maybe."

"D'you have fun last night?" Jonathan asks his little brother who nods eagerly before all the kids launch into a long recollection of the

apparently epic campaign Mike had written. They had helped El and Max construct characters earlier so they could join in.

"When is Hopper picking you up?" Steve asks El later.

"Hm. He said... 9...AM?" El answers hesitant, she'd been learning to tell time the proper way under Nancy's tutelage. Nancy quickly nods to her to confirm that she used AM correctly, before burying her face in her arms again. "But it's past ten now," El finishes.

"Huh, the Chief slept in?" Dustin ponders.

"That's not like him," Lucas observes.

"Oh!" Nancy's head flies up from the table, the sudden movement causing Jonathan to sit up as well. "Wow I forgot that," she looks at Jonathan who looks puzzled.

"Huh? Oh. Oh! God," he remembers.

"What?" Mike asks.

"Looks like you guys might be getting a stepdad," Nancy smirks slightly and gestures to Will and Jonathan.

"What?" Will perks up.

"We walked in on Joyce and Hopper yesterday."

"Oh God!" Will looks horrified.

"No, not like that, they were just sitting on the couch but... very close if you know what I mean."

"It was enough to make you want to forget," Jonathan mutters.

"Yeah yeah, hence vodka. Don't drink, kids," Nancy adds.

"Mom and Hopper?"

"Yep."

"Huh."

"I think it's nice. They're good for each other," Nancy says and Will nods in agreement after a second.

"Hey, then we'll be siblings!" Will realizes, looking at Eleven.

"Step-siblings," Jonathan corrects.

"Siblings?" El asks, hopeful.

"Yeah, if Hopper and my mom gets together."

"You'll all live together!" Dustin exclaims.

"Hey, slow down," Jonathan urges. "We don't know how serious they are about this. We just saw them together yesterday."

"... and he slept late today," Max interjects pointedly.

"I'd like to live with you," El states.

"We'd like that too!" Will exclaims.

"Yeah, yeah of course," Jonathan adds. "But lets just take it easy."

The doorbell rings. Mike runs to open it. They hear Hopper's deep voice all the way into the kitchen so El says goodbye to everyone and goes out into the hall.

"Are we moving in with the Byers?" They hear her ask straightforwardly.

"Damn kids," Hopper groans before putting a hand on El's shoulder and leading her out to the car.

When school starts up they have lunch in the darkroom the first day and Jonathan develops the photos.

"You're really photogenic," he observes as he hangs up the photo he took of her.

"Eh, might just be a case of good workmanship," she jests while blushing slightly.

Then he develops the ones she took of him. The first two come out fuzzy but in the third one focus is good.

"We need to make copies of this," she states.

"Why?"

"Because me and your mom aren't sharing," she smiles.

"Right."

"Has she said anything more about...?"

"No not more than what I told you before... they were 'just talking really' and 'are taking things slow'."

"And what did you say? You never told me that."

"I said that if she's happy I'm happy."

"Good."

"Yeah."

"Well, I have to get to class. See you later... Thumper," she adds with a smirk and gives him a quick peck on the lips as he blushes.

A/N: Nancy giving Jonathan that pet name is a headcanon that iamthethumperanon on Tumblr (or MilitaFire on Ao3) came up with and wrote an awesome oneshot of that can be read here: /works/12864501

16. A pretty sweet gig

"Hey guys, I need your help."

Jonathan turns around at the sound of Lucas' voice. He and Steve were stood in the Wheeler's hallway, making slightly awkward smalltalk. He'd been upstairs with Nancy, who was now in the bathroom, and bumped into to Steve who had brought Dustin over.

"Is it Keith again? I thought he'd understand our little chat," Steve asked.

"No, not that, I think he got the message, thanks..." glancing back to the basement door, Lucas continues. "Hey can we go into the kitchen?"

"Okay so what do you need help with?" Steve asks again as they venture into the kitchen, out of any possible earshot from the basement and the other boys and Max.

"I need your advice. About girls."

"Uh, do you really need me for this?" Jonathan asks.

"Yes! You're the one who's actually got a girlfriend!"

"Jeez, thanks kid," Steve butts in.

"Well sorry, do you have one?"

"No..."

"Exactly. But you're the one with the most experience concerning girls, right?"

Steve shrugs but Jonathan nods.

"See, this is why I need you both. I want to ask Max out. On a date. A real date."

"You haven't already?" Steve questions.

"No! We just kissed at the Snow Ball and it was awesome and we hang out all the time but we haven't like... talked about it or anything."

"Okay..."

"So, what should I do? Steve, you've asked out tons of girls, right? How should I do it?"

"Uh, I don't know. I just used to walk up to girls I liked, start talking to them and ask them out."

"Just walk up to them and ask?" Lucas asks, incredulous and to be honest Jonathan is reminded again of how different he and Steve are. He kind of envied to have that confidence with others. He was comfortable with who he was, just wished he could be slightly less awkward with other people. Then again it didn't really matter anymore.

"Yeah."

"And you?" Lucas turns to Jonathan.

"What?"

"How did you and Nancy get together?"

"Uh..." Jonathan hesitates and Steve looks uncomfortable.

"I... uh, we... it just kind of happened."

"Yeah but how? Because you were friends first right? Just like me and Max, but then you became boyfriend and girlfriend. I need to know how to take it to the next level, if you catch my drift..."

"Umm..."

"Okay, Lucas you're overthinking this," Nancy announces as she suddenly walks in, startling them all.

"What do you mean?"

"It's not complicated. You're young, you like her and she likes you. Just ask if she wants to go to the movies, just the two of you. If she asks if it's a date, say yes."

"That's it?"

"Yeah. I'll guarantee she'll say yes. Maybe bring her flowers too."

"Okay."

"Jonathan what's playing now?"

"Uh, *The New Kids*, *Fandango* and *The Falcon and The Snowman*."

"Which do you recommend?"

"*Falcon and Snowman*. Because Bowie wrote a song for it."

"Okay but what's the movie about?"

"Some spies."

"Okay. And the others?"

"*Fandango* is a comedy. *The New Kids* is a kind of horror-thriller."

"Go for the horror," Steve cuts in. "Horror movies is always a shortcut to bodily contact," he explains. At Lucas widened eyes he hastily adds "I mean you can put an arm around her if the movie is scary."

"It's rated... nevermind, if you go on Friday during my shift I can get you in."

"Okay, so ask if she wants go see a movie just the two of us, say it's a date if she asks, bring her flowers, take her to the movies..."

"I can drive you," Steve offers.

"Okay. And at the movies, I should pay, right?"

"Yes," Nancy says quickly. "That the guy always have to pay is an outdated convention, but since you're asking her out I think it's a good idea."

"Get her snacks too," Steve adds.

"Okay. Then what?"

"You've got to feel it out!"

"Feel it out?"

"Yeah, you know, what her vibe is. All goes well, kiss her goodnight and ask her out again."

"Is that a good idea, Nancy?"

"Yeah, yeah. Look, it'll go great, she already likes you, just be yourself and don't freak out."

"Okay, thanks."

xxx

A few days later a knock on her bedroom door interrupts Nancy during her English homework.

"It's open," she answers, expecting her mother since she's not expecting anyone else.

"Hey, uh can I come in?" To her surprise, it's Max who peeks her head in. She likes the girl but they haven't really talked more than a few words at a time here and there.

"Oh, yeah, sure."

"What's up?" She asks as the redheaded girl closes the door behind her and looks around the room she sees for the first time.

"Uh, yeah, hi, sorry I just... needed someone to talk too, I know we don't really know each other but I couldn't think of anyone else..."

"No, it's fine! So what do you want to talk about?"

"Uh, well Lucas asked me out."

"Okay. What did you say?"

"I said yes. But..."

"But...?"

"I don't know, I like him..."

"Good, I know he likes you a lot."

"Yeah, I like him a lot too but... but ugh, I'm just worried."

"About what? The date?"

"No! Well, a little but not really. He really likes me, right?"

"Yeah."

"Do you think he wants us to be boyfriend and girlfriend?"

"Honestly... yes, I think so. But do you want to? You don't have to..."

"Yes, I want to, I think. But that's what I'm worried about."

"About you guys being a couple?"

"Yeah. Like... okay don't laugh but like, Lucas, Dustin, Will, your brother and now El is the only friends I've got, okay?"

"Don't laugh but I think that's more friends than I've got now."

"What?"

"Eh, most people at school stopped hanging out with me when I broke up with Steve and got together with Jonathan," she shrugs. "I think she might've been my only real friend," she adds quietly and points to the pictures of Barb on the wall.

"Oh. Sorry. But well, that's kind of what I'm worried about. What if things get weird with them if me and Lucas get together? Because it was already kind of weird in the beginning because I think Lucas and Dustin argued about me. And no offense but your brother was kind of an asshole at first. But now we get along. And I don't want to like... mess up their friendship."

"None taken, believe me I know how he can be. And well... I think it'll be fine. You're a part of their 'party' or whatever, right?"

"Yes," Max answers and rolls her eyes, she's thrilled to be part of it but it still sounded kind of lame when you said party out loud.

"And El is too, right?"

"Yes."

"Well then you guys already have a couple within the party so if they can't handle you guys too they're hypocrites."

"You mean Mike and El..."

"Duh. I don't know how official they are but they're really obvious."

"Right."

"And it doesn't have to be a big deal. You're fourteen, just have fun, okay. And if Mike starts being an idiot tell me and I'll knock some sense into him."

"Okay," Max smiles. "But also..."

"Yes?"

"... like, with my family... I mean Billy's been keeping his distance but my stepfather's is as big of an asshole as he is and my mom just stands there and I don't think they'll like it..."

"You being with Lucas?"

"Yeah."

"Because he's black?"

"Yeah."

"No offense but you're family sucks."

"None taken," she mirrors from before.

"That... sucks. But, I don't think they have to know."

"What do you mean?"

"Mike hid El in our basement for a week. Last autumn I told my mom I was at a sleepover when me and Jonathan went to Chicago to take down the Lab. Just... sometime's your family don't need to know and it's for the best."

"Okay..."

"Like this: Again, you're fourteen. You're just having fun. And if you become boyfriend and girlfriend you guys don't have to hang out at your house. You can be at his place, his family is really chill. Or wherever. And you're always hanging out here or at the Arcade or whatever anyway right? So they'll just think you're doing that. It sucks if they're racist assholes who won't accept him but that shouldn't stop you if you want to be with Lucas."

"True."

"And seriously. If Billy, or your stepdad, ever gives you or Lucas any trouble, tell me."

"Okay."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Thanks."

"No problem."

"Uh, can I ask you something else?"

"Sure, shoot."

"Yeah... that, actually. How do you know how to shoot a gun?"

"Oh," she laughed a bit at her choice of words. "Uh, last year, when... uh, you do know what happened last year? When Will and Barb went missing?"

"Yeah, Lucas told me everything."

"Good. Uh well, Jonathan stole a gun from his dad, after Will's funeral, for when we were going looking in the woods for the monster. I brought the bat but then he showed me how to shoot and I was better at it than him so we switched."

"Cool. Wait so it's your bat that Steve's got?"

"Yeah, well, Jonathan's the one who modified it though. But Steve's earned it, he's got the best swing."

"Yeah, he's pretty awesome with it. But you were badass with the shotgun. Do you think you can teach me how to shoot?"

"Umm... well, maybe when your older."

"Oh come on, you just said you learned to shoot a gun last year!"

"Exactly, I was 16! You're still in middle school. Tell you what, if you don't tell anyone and still want to do it AND we still need to monster hunt then, then I'll show you sometime when you're in high school, how 'bout that?"

"Deal."

"Cool. And uh... if you need anything else just... don't hesitate to ask. Or if you just need a break from the boys once in awhile or whatever."

"Cool. I will, thanks," Max smiles and leaves the room before the boys in the basement starts wondering where she disappeared.

xxx

He can't wait for his shift to be over, counting down the minutes. Five minutes left of the last screening, then clean up, count the register and finally lock up. Then he can go see Nancy, which is all he's been able to think about the whole evening.

Suddenly the door opens.

"Hi!"

To the point where he's seeing things, is his first thought, but no, Nancy is definitely standing in front of him for real.

"Hi. What are you doing here?"

"I was bored and I couldn't wait to see you," she says and makes her way over to him and leans over the counter to give him a kiss. Her cheeks are flushed from the cold outside but her lips are warm.

"Plus," she adds, "I'm kind of curious about how it's going for Lucas and Max, you know, Max came and talked to me later?"

"Really, about what?"

"Uh-uh, that's between us. But, how are they doing? Did it look like it was going good?"

"Yeah, they were talking and laughing when they came in, looked to be having fun."

"Nice. They're sweet."

"Yeah. So, where do you want to go after I'm done here?"

"Hm. I hear Lovers Lake is nice this time of year..."

"Well, Ms. Wheeler, you-"

He's interrupted by the doors to main auditorium being thrown open and people starting to file out of the *The New Kids* screening. They spot Lucas and Max bickering but smiling.

"Hey guys," Nancy says, making them both look up.

"Hey," they greet in unison.

"How was the movie?"

"Good, Lucas got so scared!"

"I did not!"

"Yes you did!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!" Max says with emphasis and stick her tongue for good measure. Lucas rolls his eyes but can't stop grinning.

"Alright, is Steve picking you up?"

"Yeah."

"Well, have a good night, say hi to Steve for me."

"Will do, see you!"

After Lucas, Max and everyone else but Nancy has left he locks the doors to do the register and the other small menial tasks to be done. George the projectionist waves a quick goodbye before exiting through the back. Nancy watches him in silence while he does the register. When he's done with that it's time to clean up after the last screening. She follows him in.

"You don't have to-" He starts when she begins picking up litter.

"Come on, sooner you're done sooner we can go have fun," she reasons. And it's valid, and he knows she won't budge so he goes with it.

"Alright," he says and hands her a trashbag. "If you get the cups and all the cartons for candy and popcorn I'll vacuum."

She nods and they get to work. Being two obviously make the job easier and quicker. She's done before him and stands watching him as he finishes vacuuming by the front row.

"Hey I don't feel like Lovers Lake anymore," she says when he turns of the vacuum cleaner.

"Oh," he's a bit disappointed, but won't force anything of course. "That's okay, we don't"

"This is a pretty sweet gig, right?" She interrupts him with and steps

closer.

"Yeah, I guess. You know the perks, getting to see a lot of stuff for free and everything."

"Yeah," she agrees and continues walking towards him, so much so that he's forced to walk backwards. "Is it weird when people from school come in and get tickets?"

"Not really..."

"I think most people from school aren't that interested in the movie when they come here," she continues. "Ever caught anyone making out here?" She says in a sly voice. The backs of his legs bump against a front row seat and he's forced to sit down.

"I- I don't really care."

"Have you ever made out in a movie theatre?"

"N-no."

"Me neither. Dare me to see how far I'll go?" She says with that look in her eye that makes him completely melt.

"Yes," he manages get out.

And then she straddles him and his brain short-circuits.

17. Code Red

"Code Red! Code Red! Does anyone copy? Code Red!"

"Dustin it's Will! What is it, what's happened?"

"Honorary party member in danger! Honorary party member in danger!"

"What?!"

"Billy went after Steve again! We're in real trouble over here! Send help!"

"Hang on!"

Will rushes out of his room and quickly knocks on his brother's door before opening it, they had no time to waste so he could just pray that Jonathan and Nancy were decent. Thankfully, they were sat fully dressed on the bed, textbooks laid out in front of them.

"Will, what's wrong?" Jonathan looks up, concerned just from the way Will ran into the room.

"Steve's in trouble!"

"What?" Nancy asks, immediately standing up.

"Dustin just called! It's Billy."

"Where are they?" Jonathan asks, grabbing his jacket and checking for his car keys.

"Dustin where are you?" Will asks into the Super-Com.

"Behind the burger place on Lenora!"

"Alright we're coming!" Nancy shouts into the walkie-talkie before hurrying out the door, Jonathan right behind her.

"Hurry!" Comes Dustin's gargled response.

Nancy fiddles with the glove compartment as Jonathan floors it. She finds what she's looking for, checks that it's still loaded despite the fact that she already knows it is, and puts the gun in her pocket, just in case. Lenora's not far and as they pull around back to the parking lot they see Dustin peering around the corner. Then they see them, Billy's got Steve up against the wall and is wailing on him, but Steve is still standing, somewhat. Jonathan hits the brakes and they run out of the car.

Together they pull Billy off Steve which catches him offguard. Jonathan quickly connects, landing a punch on the jaw followed by another one right on the nose. The taller boy staggers back but rallies and counters, connecting above Jonathan's right eye in the same spot Tommy H. had landed a punch months earlier, but it doesn't even seem to faze Jonathan who continues throwing punches and quickly gains the upper hand, eventually knocking Billy to the ground. As he lays sprawled out on the ground Jonathan turns to Nancy and Steve who was propping himself up with a hand against the brick wall.

"You alright man?"

"Never better," Steve manages to get out.

"Look out!" Dustin's scream makes all three of them turn their heads. Billy's up off the ground and has now produced a switchblade and is swiftly approaching Jonathan who stands his ground.

Billy is stopped in his tracks by a clicking sound and something silvery in the corner of his eye.

"Don't think I haven't used this before," Nancy says shortly, pointing the gun right in Billy's face.

"Fucking psycho bitch," Billy spits out, but is visibly shook. He's bleeding from the face.

"Yeah, I am. So you better leave us alone. Fuck off."

The standoff is interrupted by the sound of a new car barrelling into the parking lot and coming to a screeching halt. At the sight of the police cruiser Billy tries to flee but Hopper is out of his car in no

time, blocks the slightly disoriented teenager's way, throws him to the ground and promptly cuffs him.

"Goddamn it try not to bleed all over the leather would you?" Is the only words Hopper has for Billy as he pushes him into the backseat of the cruiser before walking over to the trio.

"You kids alright?"

"Not sure," Nancy answers as she put her gun away and looks at Steve.

"I'm okay guys," he insists.

"No you're not," Jonathan observes as Steve visibly stumbles. Nancy and Jonathan props him up on either side and starts helping him to their car.

"Holy shit that was so badass!" Dustin exclaims as he comes running over. "You were just beating the crap out of him," he continues to Jonathan, "and then you when he pulled that dick move," he directs at Nancy, "and the Chief's tackle, woah! Hey are you alright?" He suddenly changes subject and tone as he looks at Steve.

"Thanks for the concern dude," Steve groans.

"Open the car door," Jonathan instructs and Dustin quickly obliges and helps lower Steve into the backseat of Jonathan's car.

"How did you get here?" Nancy turns to Hopper.

"Well since his first thought at trouble apparently isn't to phone the police but you guys," Hopper starts but is interrupted.

"Hey! I couldn't get to a phone, but I had my Super-Com with me!" Dustin defends himself, while pulling of his hoodie and pressing it over Steve's bleeding nose and mouth.

"Will called me after you left on your little rescue mission. Seems like it was going well."

"It was. Jonathan had knocked him down, but the psycho pulled a

knife," Nancy explains.

"You were ready to shoot the guy?"

"If he's fucking coming at my boyfriend with a knife? Yes. But I was thinking that the threat would be enough," Nancy answers, looking defiantly at Hopper.

Hopper nods and thinks for a moment.

"Where did you actually get that gun?"

"Uh, I stole it from my dad. Last year," Jonathan answers for her while pressing his sleeve against the cut above his eye to keep blood from dripping into it. Nancy looks at him, concerned.

"Okay. Good thing that I didn't see a gun then. Understood?" He looks over the four of them.

"Yes."

"Yep."

"Uh-huh."

"Good. Now, take Harrington to the hospital while I take the idiot downtown and file a report. I'll come by later."

They quickly pile into the car, Dustin jumping in the backseat next to Steve while Jonathan gets behind the wheel.

"Wait, are you good to drive?" Nancy asks, looking at the bleeding cut at his eyebrow and noticing he had also split his lip.

"I'm fine, we've gotta go."

Jonathan speeds off and Nancy turns to the backseat where Dustin was still pressing his hoodie to Steve's face but other cuts kept leaking with blood. The skin around both his eyes were already turning different colors and he seemed to be slipping in and out of consciousness.

"Wait I stole some napkins, they're in my backpack," Dustin suddenly remembers. Nancy goes digging into it and finds them. She gives a quick glance back to Jonathan and presses one napkin to his eyebrow. He reaches up and holds it in place so she can press the others to Steve's cuts. Suddenly Dustin's Super-Com sparks to life.

"Dustin! Come in! What happened?" Will's voice sounds out.

"Yeah what the hell's going on?" Lucas joins in.

"We're on our way to the hospital, Jonathan beat him up and then the Chief arrested Billy!" Dustin yells into his headset.

"What? Billy got arrested?" Max's voice cuts in on Lucas's frequency, sounding relieved.

"Affirmative."

"Are you guys okay?" Mike's voice joins in.

"Well uh, debatable about Steve but yeah we're fine."

"Jonathan? Honey are you okay?" Joyce's voice surprises them all, she must've grabbed Will's Super-Com.

"I'm fine!" Jonathan shouts.

"He's fine," Dustin relays into the headset.

"He's got a cut but it's not too bad," Nancy says and Dustin again repeats the information.

"Okay, we'll see you at the hospital," Joyce answers.

"We're on our way too!" Lucas adds for him and Max.

"They don't have t-" Nancy starts but is promptly cut off by her brother relaying that he was going as well.

When they got to the hospital Dustin runs ahead as they help Steve out of the car. They can hear him shouting for doctors as they get through the doors. Some nurses come over to help immediately.

"So what happened here?" The on-call doctor asks as they're taken into a treatment room.

"Attacked by a mega-douchebag," is Dustin's explanation.

"I see. Do we need to call the police?"

"No need, Chief Hopper's already got the idiot. Can you just fix them up?" Nancy asks impatiently.

The doctor takes care of Steve while a nurse stitches up Jonathan. Nancy steps out and drags Dustin along with her, in search of a phone, finding one in waiting room by the entrance. She tries fruitlessly to get a hold of Steve's parents.

"I think they're out of town," Dustin informs her.

"Figures. You should call your mom by the way," she hands him the receiver. Dustin dials and quickly gets through.

"Hey mom, sorry I'm... No, I'm fine, I'm fine but listen, we're at the hospital... No I promise, I'm fine, but Steve... Well it was that douchebag Billy we told you about... No, Nancy and Jonathan helped and then Hopper arrested him... Nancy tried but there was no answer, they're out of town again... Yeah... yeah... yeah I'll see you soon... Love you too, mom."

Dustin hangs up the phone just as Joyce rush through the doors followed by Will, Mike, Lucas and Max. Looking around wildly before spotting Nancy and Dustin they run over, Joyce leading the way and pulling both in for a quick hug.

"Are you okay? Where's Jonathan? And Steve?"

"We're fine, they're getting stitched up," Nancy answers. "Jon's fine, he was able to drive and everything," she adds to calm Joyce.

"What about Steve?" Lucas asks.

"Don't know, he got it pretty bad, passed out for a bit in the car."

Just then Jonathan comes out into the waiting room.

"They're checking to see if he has a concussion," he informs the group.

"Jonathan! Are you okay?" Joyce asks as both she and Nancy starts looking over the stitches above his eye. He's got ice to his knuckles.

"I'm fine, mom."

"You should've seen Billy! Jonathan kicked his ass, man!" Dustin exclaims. Jonathan shrugs and averts his gaze, but Max looks straight at him.

"Dude, seriously. Thanks. A lot."

"Uh, no problem."

"Dusty!" A new voice calling out causes them all to turn around. Mrs. Henderson rushes through the entrance and straight to them as she catches sight of her son.

"Mom," Dustin whines, but not wholeheartedly, as he's pulled into another hug.

"Are you sure you're okay, Dusty?"

"Yes mom."

"Oh, hello Joyce," she says as she looks around at the others.

"Hi Claudia."

"Yeah yeah lets go see Steve," Mike interrupts.

"Yeah," Nancy agrees and turns around, leading the way back to the room they left him in.

"Hey, hey," the doctor protests as they pile into the room.

"But we're family!" Dustin protests.

"All eight of you?" The nurse questions.

"Yes!" Max exclaims.

"Stevie, are you okay?"

"Been better, Mrs. Henderson, thanks."

"How is he?" Nancy turns to the doctor.

"Facial lacerations and a light concussion. He can go home tonight, but shouldn't be left alone. I take it one of you are his mother?"

"N-no."

"Oh."

"I tried calling your house Steve but-" Nancy begins.

"They're out of town, again," he cuts off.

"You're staying with us," Mrs. Henderson says firmly.

"Thanks."

"Hey," a new voice cuts in. Hopper enters the room. "How is he, Doc?"

"Facial lacerations and a light concussion," the doctor repeats.

"Okay. Harrington, I can charge Hargrove for assault and possession of a deadly weapon, and I'd say you have a very good chance of winning in court. But I need to take statements from you, you, and you two," he finishes, pointing at Steve, Dustin, Nancy and Jonathan.

"Okay," Steve answers and they all nod.

"Will Billy go to jail?" Max asks.

"Maybe."

"Yes!"

"Aren't you his sister?"

"Step sister. And so what? I hate him, he's an asshole."

"Alright."

They clear the room at Hopper's order so he can take Steve's statement. He takes Dustin's, Nancy's and Jonathan's as well, and a written report from the doctor about Steve's injuries, before going back to the station again. The rest of them file out into the parking lot.

"My car..." Steve realizes as he's about to get into the backseat of Mrs. Henderson's car with Dustin.

"We'll get it. Keys," Nancy demands.

"Thanks," he throws them over and she catches them in mid-air. "And uh, thanks for tonight," he adds, looking at Nancy and Jonathan who simply nods.

Joyce packs in Lucas' bike and Max's skateboard in the trunk of her car while the kids pile in the car with Will. Mike, Nancy and Jonathan get in his car. They drive back to Lenora where Nancy gets out and gets in Steve's car. Jonathan follows her on the drive over to the Henderson's where Nancy leaves it and gets back in Jonathan's car so he can drive her and Mike home.

On Monday Jonathan's car is more crowded then ever. Used to driving Will to school and picking up Nancy and sometimes Mike and Lucas aswell, they now make the turn to pick up Steve and Dustin too. Nancy called the night before to see how Steve was feeling, he insisted that he was good to go, but neither she nor Mrs. Henderson thought that he should drive.

"We gotta pick up Max too," Lucas says after Steve and Dustin have piled in the back, causing Will to end up on both of their laps and Mike to climb over the midconsole to share a seat with Nancy in the front instead.

"Jesus," Jonathan mutters but obliges.

"Billy ran away!" Max shouts as she climbs into the car, settling on Lucas' lap.

The announcement makes them all turn around as Jonathan drives.

"What?"

"He ran away! My stepdad picked him up from jail on Saturday morning then yelled at him the whole day. Then on Sunday Billy was gone, his car was gone and like half of his cologne-stinking closet, and my mom's purse was missing a couple of hundred dollars. And he still hasn't come back!"

"Good."

"Awesome!"

The way Steve and Jonathan looks combined with Billy's noticeable absence is of course what everyone's talking about in the high school halls. The rumor mill is in full swing by lunch time. The winter cold has forced Jonathan and Nancy to move from the hood of his car. Most often they opted for the darkroom to have privacy, but today they join Steve at a table in the cafeteria.

They eat in silence at first, it still felt a bit awkward to be together just the three of them when they weren't dealing with interdimensional threats or other dangers. Nancy trying to figure out how to talk with Steve post-everything, while Jonathan was still somewhat guarded towards Steve. They had each other's back, obviously, but he had no clue what they'd talk about other than what would forever link them. Plus, he couldn't completely forget what Steve had said in the alley in the fall of 1983, about his mom, about Will. Steve had proved since then that he was actually a selfless, good guy, overall. But still, those words lingered and they hadn't talked about it since.

"You know," it's Steve who starts talking, apparently tiring of the tension. "I've come to realize something about myself through all of this," he lowers his voice before continuing. "Through three fist fights and two Demogorgon attacks... I can kick monster ass with a bat but can't actually fight for shit."

Nancy snorts with laughter and a smile almost makes its way onto Jonathan's face.

"Yeah," Nancy agrees. "Why are you on the basketball team instead of the baseball team, again?"

"Their uniforms look better on me."

Nancy rolls her eyes and Jonathan gives a chuckle.

"And I guess with Billy gone I might get my place as starting point guard back," he muses. "But Byers, seriously, you gotta teach me how to fight like that. How come you're so good with it?" Steve continues.

"Uh, the one thing my father taught me, I guess," Jonathan answers and looks down at his sandwich. Nancy squeezes his hand under the table.

"Oh. Shit man, sorry, shit. I didn't even... sorry."

"No, just uh... don't let your guard down, I guess. Keep wailing on 'em. That's all I know."

"Yeah, guess I found that out the hard way," Steve smirks.

"Uh yeah, sorry about that."

"No dude, I deserved it. Did I ever apologize for what I said? Like, properly."

"No, you didn't."

"Shit. Well, I am. Sorry, it was really messed up, the things I said."

"Okay."

Another lull in the conversation is broken by Nancy.

"So Steve... how is it looking, with college and everything?"

"Oh, yeah... I didn't send the essay in on time so... I don't know. I don't even know what I'd want to do anyway. Guess I'll just work for my dad, it'll be alright."

Nancy frowns at the answer.

"Why don't you apply to be a cop?" Jonathan mumbles.

"What?" Steve asks, surprised. Nancy turns her head as well.

"Nothing, just... I bet Hopper would like to have someone on the force who knows about... all the stuff. And you seem to have some protective instinct."

"Plus you'd get a baton to use, like the bat. No fists," Nancy remarks.

"Huh," Steve nods, thinking. "I've never thought about that... you really think I could do it?"

"Yeah."

"Hm. I'll ask the Chief next time I bring Dustin around to your house for those play dates. Or party gatherings or whatever they call it. By the way, how's that whole thing looking, with Hopper and your mom?"

Nancy laughs and shakes her head as Jonathan grumbles.

"They're taking things slow," she answers for him.

"Right on."

They make it through lunch. It's less awkward but still kind of weird to talk to Steve when none of their lives hang in the balance. They share no interests and are completely different people. But Jonathan knows they will always have each other's back. And that was more than enough.

18. We should make a fuss

"Hi Nancy," Will smiles as he opens the door but looks slightly confused. "Jonathan's working, I thought you knew that?"

"Hi! I know, but I didn't come here to see him, I need to talk to you," she begins as Will steps back to let her in. "And you," she says to Joyce who's standing further down the hall.

"About what, sweetie?" Joyce asks.

"Jonathan's birthday is coming up, right?"

"I don't think he wants a big fuss," Will says as they sit down at the kitchen table to plan it.

"He never does," Joyce notes. "He doesn't want to be a bother," she shakes her head slightly, thinking about her selfless son.

"But we should make a fuss," she says.

Joyce nods her head in agreement.

"What do you usually do?" She asks.

"Well I usually make the cake the night before and tries to trade away my shift at work so we can celebrate on the day," taking a drag of her cigarette Joyce adds: "Have been able to do it most years."

"That's nice. I mean Will, you're right, but we could make a fuss without making it huge just... he needs to know and see that there are people who care about him. A lot."

"Yeah," Will agrees. "And not just us. The guys think he's cool, Max too. And El."

"Yeah, and even Steve cares, in his way."

"And Hop," Joyce adds. "He may not say it but he cares about all of you, a lot."

"We should invite everyone," she starts, still thinking. "But still keep it small. No point in making it big since he'll just worry about the money in that case."

"We should make it a real surprise." Will suggests.

"Yes! Hm... okay how about this: Joyce, you lie and say you couldn't get off work and that you'll celebrate later or something. I'll take him out somewhere so he's out of the house, you guys get everything ready, everyone will come over and then I bring him back and we'll surprise him?"

"Sounds good!"

"I can get the party stuff since you guys will have to make the preparations. I can help with the cake too if you want to but fair warning I'm not that good in the kitchen so..."

"I'll handle the cake," Joyce smiles.

"Will maybe you can make some posters?"

"Sure!"

She and Will informs "The Party" of their plans next time they're all in the basement. They all readily agree to the plans and to not ruin the surprise. Dustin claims they all need to make a vow of silence but it turns out that the threat of getting their ass handed to them by Nancy was enough for everyone to promise to keep quiet about the surprise. Before he leaves, Joyce picking him up since Jonathan's working, Will turns to Nancy.

"Have you got a present for him?"

"No, not yet. I was gonna go look tomorrow when he's at work."

"Oh. Hey, could I maybe tag along? Mom was supposed to take me so I could get a present for him but she has to pick up a shift tomorrow so she can be off on Saturday for the party."

"Of course!"

"Do you have any ideas?" She asks Will the next day as she drives them downtown, a mix tape she stole from Jonathan playing in the car.

"I think we should hit the record store first."

"Good thinking."

"I wanna check the new releases, I've got enough saved up for The Smiths new album I hope."

To his delight Will does indeed find Meat Is Murder among the new releases and within his price range.

"Nice," Nancy nods.

"Have you found anything?" Will asks on their way to the register.

"Nah, we can't both get him records."

Will nods, then freezes when sees something on the wall.

"Aw man, he'd love that," he says. She follows his gaze to find a huge Ziggy Stardust poster on the wall.

"Yeah," she agrees.

"Hey, how much is that poster?" Will asks the man behind the counter.

"Not for sale."

"Come on," he protests but Nancy silences him by tugging on his arm.

"Hey, you should get him the album. You can draw a better version of that poster yourself."

"Good idea," Will nods.

They make their over to the counter. As Will gets out his money it's now her turn to get distracted by a poster, this one a smaller one tacked on to the front of the counter, advertising a The Cure concert in Indianapolis in a couple of weeks. Tickets available now.

"Hey, how about that?" She nudges Will.

"He'd love that."

Saturday is Jonathan's birthday, to keep up the charade she casually asks him during the week how they'll celebrate it. He tells her his mom is working that day and he on Friday so they'll celebrate on Sunday and that his mom wanted him to invite her. She plays innocent and happily agrees.

On Saturday morning she comes over to the Byers with all the contents for a good picnic in her backpack.

"Hey," he answers the door, looking surprised but pleased to see her.

"Hi, happy birthday!" She says and gives him a kiss.

"Thanks, I didn't know you were-"

"I thought I'd surprise you today before we all celebrate tomorrow," she interrupts.

"Cool, uh, do you want to come in? I was just about to start on breakfast."

"Actually," she begins and opens her backpack, briefly showcasing its content, "I thought we could go outside."

"Oh! Sure, great."

"Hey Will if you want a ride over to the Wheeler's we gotta go now, I'm gonna be late for work," Joyce calls in the background.

"Hang on!" Will answers.

Wow they're really committed to this, she notes to herself. Loving it.

"Oh, hey Nancy!" Joyce greets.

"Hi!"

"Are you going out?"

"Yeah, picnic."

"Oh how nice!" Joyce begins, "Oh my keys," she continues and goes back to "search" for them. "Well have fun you two, you go, I'll lock up as soon as I find my keys."

"Don't be late for work, mom," Jonathan says as he puts on his jacket.

"Yeah yeah, I'm so sorry I couldn't get my shift covered sweetie, I promise I'll make it up to you tomorrow. See you tonight!"

"Relax, mom, no problem. See you tonight."

They go into the woods, to their spot, what will always be their spot. Where he showed her how to shoot a gun in the fall of '83. Where she showed him how to *properly* shoot a gun on New Year's Eve. This time she comes armed with sandwiches, fruit, some cookies her mom made earlier in the week, coffee in a thermos, juice and Twizzlers (Jonathan's favorite). She puts down a blanket she brought and sits down crosslegged on it. He sits down next to her while she takes out all the food.

"This is great, Nance, thanks," he smiles.

"No problem. Were you really surprised?"

"Yeah, mostly to seeing you up so early, you're not exactly known to be an early riser," he smirks.

"Shut up," she replies and throws a grape at him.

While they dig in to the food, she can't stop thinking about what he'd said that autumn day in 1983. "My dad took me hunting on my birthday. He made me kill a rabbit. I cried for a week." That had been his tenth birthday. She's amazed he felt comfortable enough with her already at that point to share such a personal story. It also makes her sad that she knew his worst birthday memory (by God, she at least hoped that was the worst one), but not his best. So she decides to ask.

"Hey, best birthday memory?"

He thinks for a second before answering.

"Probably Will's eleventh, I managed to get tickets so we could go see-

"No," she smiles and shakes her head. Typical of him, to think of one of Will's birthdays rather than his own. "I meant of your birthday, Thumper," she tacks on her special pet name for him at the end, making him blush.

"Oh. Uh... my sixteenth. Mom got me the car. Will told me later that she haggled the guy in the used car lot for thirty minutes to get him to lower the price, then Will looked inside and saw that the car didn't have a tape deck. When he told her she went over to the next one, checked that it could play tapes and was in working order, then haggled for that one for another half hour. Eventually the guy just let her have it so he could get rid of her."

He chuckles as he tells the tale and she laughs with him.

"Your mom's awesome."

"Yeah, I know."

When they're done eating she reaches into her backpack again. She put the concert tickets in a small wrapped box, because she didn't just want to hand him an envelope or something. She holds it out to him.

"Happy birthday."

"Thanks," he takes it and smiles shyly.

She watches him as he carefully unwraps it and lifts the lid. The way his eyes instantly lights up when he sees what it is makes her feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

"This is awesome! Thanks so much," he says and gives her a kiss.

"You're welcome," she answers and kisses him again.

Clearing away the food containers and all the rest to make room they lay down next to each other on the blanket. Looking up at the treetops against the spring sky she feels completely content with her existence. Lying next to him, knowing he's happy. They lay there for

a long time, talking about everything and nothing, about junior year soon being over, about where the hell Billy could be now, about which movies are playing at The Hawk now, about her parents failing marriage, about their little brothers and the rest of the kids. She keeps sneaking glances at her watch to make sure they don't miss the time she, Joyce and Will agreed upon, but they've got hours of time.

They talk about The Cure too, of course. It was one of his favorite bands that she'd really gotten into since being introduced to them through his mix tapes, so the concert really was perfect.

"What's that song called? The one that goes," she asks and proceeds to hum a tune and drum out a rhythm with her hands against her thighs.

"*Killing an Arab*?" He guesses.

"Yeah! Good song. Weird title, though."

"It's about that Camus book."

"*The Stranger*? Cool, I've read that."

"Did you like it?"

"Yeah."

He nods in agreement. She thinks for a second, trying to remember what the English teacher Mrs. Carmichael had said in class. It was a quote by Camus, but it was from something else.

"You know, he wrote something once, that I like," she begins when she's remembered it. "In the depths of winter I finally learned that within me there lay an invincible summer."

A beat passes while he takes in the words.

"I like that. I've felt that," he then says.

"Exactly. Same," she replies, taking his hand and letting her fingers run over his scar.

Eventually she starts thinking about what the best way to get him back to his house would be. Thankfully the universe got her covered there. It starts to rain. She sits up with a squeal and he follows her. They hastily pack up the things. He shields her against the rain with his jacket. A simple gesture but one that kind of makes her swoon a bit none the less. But looking down she realizes something.

"A real gentleman," she says, then with a smirk adds. "Though we could just both use the blanket, otherwise."

"Oh," he says while she picks up the blanket. "Good thinking," he smiles and together they run back to his house under blanket cover.

By the time they're out of the woods the rain has stopped as suddenly as it started. They walk around to the front so she can put her backpack in her car. She's right behind him as he opens the front door, doing her best to hide a grin.

"SURPRISE!"

He feels himself stumble back at the sudden burst of sound, looking around wildly as heads pop up from behind furniture. His mom, Will, Mike, Dustin, Lucas, Max, Steve, even Eleven and Hopper suddenly appearing. He feels Nancy sneaking her arms around him, giggling with delight.

"Happy birthday!" The group chorus next, fully standing up. He's still very confused. He looks around, seeing a homemade banner reading "HAPPY 17th JONATHAN" on the wall, instantly recognizing his brother's handiwork. There's festive decorations hanging everywhere, taking over the room much like the Christmas lights or Mindflayer drawings had done in the past.

"Wha-, what's going on?"

"Surprise party, dude!" Dustin calls out.

"Obviously," Mike tacks on.

"Happy birthday sweetheart," his mom says again as she comes over and gives him a hug. Will follows and exchanges a smirk and a

highfive with Nancy. He looks curiously between all three of them.

"Did you plan this?" He asks Nancy point blank.

"Group effort," she smirks. "Happy 17th," she adds and presses a kiss to his cheek.

He's in awe as he looks at his girlfriend, his mother and his brother, that they orchestrated this together.

They lead him towards the kitchen where a cake is placed on the table.

"Were you surprised?" El asks.

"Yeah."

"Good," she nods seriously. "We practiced."

"Both at home and here," Hopper sighs before putting a hand to his shoulder. "Happy birthday, kid."

"Thanks."

"Make a wish," his mom says after she's finished lighting the candles on the cake.

He looks around at the people in the room. A wish? That's easy. He closes his eyes and blows out the candles, wishing for things to always be like this, for his brother to be safe and happy, for his mom to be happy, for Nancy being by his side and being happy. Then he'll always be happy.

"What did you wish for?" El asks as they all sit down and his mom starts cutting the cake, giving him the first piece.

"He can't say, then it won't come true!" Dustin explains.

"It doesn't matter, it's just superstition," Lucas objects.

"No, it's tradition," Nancy settles the short argument. "Point is, he can't say," she lets El know.

The boys carry the conversation for awhile, talking over each other as usual. Nancy and Steve compliments his mom on the cake.

"I asked Jonathan about his best birthday memory, he told me about his 16th, when you got him the car," Nancy lets his mom know. His mom smiles and Will starts to giggle at the memory.

"That was awesome, I think mom scared the guy!" Will exclaims and at the questioning looks from the others retells the story again.

"Sounds about right," Hopper smirks at his mom as Will finishes. She rolls her eyes.

"Hey I know what we should do," Mike suddenly pipes up. "Favourite Jonathan memory, go!"

"Oh there's too many to choose from," his mom smiles.

"Yeah. Maybe when we built Castle Byers," Will says and smiles wide at the memory.

"When he beat the crap out of Billy!" Dustin calls out.

"Same," Max pipes in with a smirk.

"Uh, think I actually prefer when we kicked Demogorgon ass," Steve buts in.

"Not when he beat you up?" Mike questions.

"Shut up."

"When he took us to see The Empire Strikes Back," Lucas says.

"Yeah, that's mine too," Mike agrees.

"When he gave me good music," El says.

"Hey!" Hopper objects. El gives him a look.

"How 'bout you, Chief?" Mike asks.

"Oh I don't know, should I pick the time he got arrested or the times

he directly disobeyed my orders or the time he insulted my exemplary musical tastes," Hopper jokes.

"The last one, probably," Lucas notes.

"How about you, sis, what's your favourite Jonathan memory?" Mike asks Nancy with a devilish smirk, waggling his eyebrows. Nancy goes beatred in the seat next to him.

"That's... private," she says, trying and failing to shoot an intimidating look at her little brother.

"Gross!" Mike replies and his friends make disgusted faces.

"I didn't mean it like that!" Nancy retorts, getting more and more redfaced. "It's between us."

"Come on, say one thing," Dustin cuts in.

Nancy thinks for a second before answering. "Okay, the Snow Ball."

"Volunteering at the Snow Ball together? Really?" Mike questions.

"No, Stupid," Nance retorts. "After all you little kids were in bed he asked me to dance," Nancy shares. He knows he's blushing profusely now. He can hear El audibly coo while the boys groan. "It was very sweet, and romantic," she finishes.

"Like in movies?" El asks.

"Better," Nancy says firmly. He just stares down at his piece of cake and hopes his cheeks isn't the shade of stop signs at least. He feels her grasp his fingers under the table.

It's been a bit overwhelming, listening to everyone talk about him. But as he looks around the table, he feels really glad that they are all there.

After cake it's time for presents. He quickly showcases the Cure tickets Nancy gave him earlier.

"This is on behalf of the Party," Dustin starts and hands over a

haphazardly wrapped gift.

"Get it?" Dustin then asks after he's torn the paper off to find an Atari cartridge with the label *Boxing* inside.

"Yeah," he chuckles. "Thanks, guys."

"Ooh, I'm gonna kick your ass at that," Nancy comments.

"As if," he shoots back.

"Will, who's better at video games, me or Jonathan?" Nancy turns to his brother.

"Nancy," Will answers immediately.

"Traitor," he jokes while Nancy grins.

"This is from us," El says and hands over a gift on behalf of her and Hopper. Inside he finds a box of Eggos and a Gram Parsons record.

"There's some real music for you."

"And food."

"Uh, thanks guys."

He can't help but smile at the wonderfully weird gifts he's received.

"My turn!" Will calls out and produces both a wrapped square of a familiar size and a large rolled up paper. He eagerly unwraps the square and unfurls the rolled up paper.

"Buddy, this is awesome!" He proudly showcases the Ziggy Stardust poster for everyone.

Finally his mother slides a small box over the table. He unwraps it and lifts the lid, finding a watch inside. A *nice* watch.

"It was your granddad's," she explains as he marvels at it.

"It's beautiful," he says, carefully holding it up. Dustin and Steve whistles and Hopper nods approvingly. He quickly takes off the cheap

wristwatch that he usually wears and with Nancy's help puts the new (old) one on. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, honey."

"Can I have your old one?" Will asks.

"Sure," he answers and hands it over.

The day floats on seamlessly. The boys somehow talks them into an Atari tournament. And Nancy does kick his ass. But at least he beats Steve, and he'd be lying if he didn't enjoy that just a little bit. The question of food slipped everyone's mind so in the evening Hopper volunteers to go out and get pizza for everyone. While he's out and his mom busies herself with cleaning up a bit in the kitchen and the kids are glued to the TV, Steve subtly asks for him and Nancy to join him outside.

"I got something for you, but didn't want to give it to you in front of everyone. Wait here," Steve says and leaves them on the porch while he jogs to his car that Jonathan gathers must be parked further down the road since he didn't see it earlier.

"Having fun?" Nancy asks as they sit down on the porch.

"Yeah, it's been great. Thanks for this."

"I'm glad. Can I stay the night?"

"Yeah, I mean of course, but won't your parents...?"

"Think they're too busy arguing," she answers. He puts a hand on her knee. "Plus I can get Mike to cover for me if needed."

He nods. Steve returns, holding a bottle.

"I still don't get why vodka is your drink of choice, but here, I swiped it from my parents liquor cabinet so it's the good stuff. Happy birthday, man."

"Thanks," he chuckles.

"Once again, considering your track record, and especially yours," Steve continues, looking pointedly at Nancy who rolls her eyes, "I suggest you mix it up better."

"Yeah, yeah."

"But hey," Steve continues, unscrewing the cork before handing the bottle back to him. "Let's celebrate with one at least. To Jonathan," he finishes, raising an imaginary glass. Nancy follows suit and repeats his words and he in turn raises the bottle and takes a sip before passing it to Nancy. It makes its way around both once and twice and they sit there for awhile, talking about monster hunting, Steve's upcoming graduation. The future.

Hopper's burly voice takes them by surprise.

"Hey Harrington, if you want to be my cadet I'd suggest you'd stop it with the bootlegging," the chief of police says, coming towards them with pizza boxes in his grasp. Steve tenses up.

"Um, uh..." he stutters, searching for an appropriate answer.

"Jesus, relax kid, I'm not such a hardass, when I'm in the mood," Hopper smirks and swipes the bottle from Nancy. "What do you got here anyway," he begins, reading the label he lets out a whistle. "Mr. Harrington's I take it?" He notes and takes a drink and to Jonathan's great surprise, hands it back. "Be responsible, kids. Don't want to have to arrest any of you for public intoxication, alright? Now let's get inside before those vultures in there can smell the pizza out here."

"So, you really liked it?" She asks later in bed.

"Yeah, it was great."

"Good. We worried you wouldn't like the attention."

"I... didn't mind it."

"I just... You never think about yourself. I just wanted you to know that there are a lot of people who care about you. Not just me, Will and your mom. El adores you. The kids all like you. You know what

Mike said when we started dating?"

"No."

"That he was happy for me because you're cool."

"Great, the middle schoolers think I'm cool," he jokes.

"Think it counts for something, he never said that about Steve," she smirks.

He chuckles before turning serious.

"Can I just say something? It just... it means a lot that you... with mom and Will, I mean that you make the effort to..."

"Jonathan," she interrupts. "It's no effort. They're awesome. It means the world that they... I mean they've basically taken me in, it feels like. I love it."

"I love you."

"Love you too," she reciprocates and kisses him and looks at him with that special glint in her eye that let's him know the night is far from over.

19. This is what matters

The Cure's concert is two weeks after his birthday. When he picks up Nancy that night she's wearing his band t-shirt with the Pornography cover on it, tucked into a plaid skirt. His eyes go wide at the sight of her.

"I was wondering where that was," he says after he's recovered.

"Just borrowing it."

"Nah, you can keep it. Looks better on you."

"Thanks," she smiles.

Indianapolis isn't far. On the drive over she tells him of El's progress. Nancy has been tutoring her several days a week for a long time now and is amazed by how fast of a learner the girl is. He's noticed her progress aswell, she's been spending more time over at their house lately, with Hopper. He tries not read to much into it, but he lets slip to Nancy that it's not the worst, having Hopper around.

"Just so you know El keeps asking me when Hopper and your mom will get married so..." she informs him.

"Oh God."

"Maybe Hopper shouldn't let her watch so much day time TV. Things happen so fast on those shows. I told her to be patient."

"Okay..."

"But..."

"But what?"

"... long story short we have a bet on when you'll officially have a stepdad, you want in?"

"What?!"

"El says in the summer, I say next spring. Oh, and Will says by the end of this year."

"Will's in on this too?!"

"Of course! So, you wanna bet? Winner gets Eggos. El set the prize."

"Jesus," he mutters.

"So you don't want in?" She smirks.

He thinks about it for a second.

"Next fall... when I'm hopefully in college far away," he mumbles. She laughs and hits him lightly on the arm.

"That was amazing!" She half-yells in his ear as their making their way to the exit after the concert.

"Yeah it was," he agrees. "Thanks again, for this," he continues.

She plants a big kiss on his cheek in response.

They've only been driving for a couple of minutes when he hears a sound. He shushes Nancy who's currently air drumming and singing along to *Primary* on the mix tape she, not he, put in.

"What?" She asks, confused.

"Hang on," he listens for a second. "Damnit. Think we've got a flat."

"Oh."

"I've got a spare in the trunk."

"Is there any place we can stop?" She asks, looking around at the surroundings.

"Yeah, there's a gas station a couple of blocks down here," he answers, making a left turn.

"Do you know this area?"

"A bit," he answers shortly, turning up the volume on the music again instead of explaining further.

He pulls into the gas station and gets out of the car. After a quick inspection he finds that it's the right one of the rear tyres that has a flat. Nancy gets out to help him get the spare and the tyre iron out of the trunk. He kneels down and gets to work while she leans against the door to keep him company.

"The second encore was awesome," she states.

"Yeah, I didn't think they would do *Boys Don't Cry*."

"That was great."

"I think I wore my tape of the single out, I used to play it over and over."

"I did that too, once."

"Really? What song?" He asks as he tightens the nuts on the new tyre.

"The theme from Sesame Street," she giggles, making him laugh.

"Well well," a voice calls out, causing him to go completely rigid. Of course. Just his luck. 700,000 people in Indianapolis and they have to get a flat tyre close to where the one person in the whole city, in the whole world, he didn't want to see lives. "Hey there, son," the voice continues.

"Hello, *Lonnie*," he answers curtly as he gets up, clutching the tyre iron in one hand. He feels Nancy looking from his father to him.

"Come on, that's no way to greet your father," Lonnie says as he opens the pack of cigarettes he must've just bought inside, taking one out and lighting it. "So what brings you here?" He continues when he doesn't get a response.

"None of your business."

"Charming as always. Need any help?" Lonnie chuckles and gestures towards the tyre he's almost done changing.

"No."

Lonnie takes a long drag on his cigarette.

"Well, who is this?" Lonnie switches subject, looking Nancy up and down. She crosses her arms over her chest. She loved the way Jonathan looked at her when he saw her, but Lonnie's sleazy gaze makes her deeply uncomfortable. Jonathan immediately moves in front of her, blocking her from view.

"Go away," he growls.

"Aw, come on now son, you should be proud! Never thought I'd see you with a girl, and now you just roll into town with a hot piece of ass like that!"

"Shut up."

"Truth be told I kind of thought you were queer. Both of you. Your mother's fault."

"Shut. Up."

"How is she? Stayin' out of the looney bin, I hope?"

"Fuck you."

Lonnie smirks.

"You haven't changed a bit, have you?"

"You too."

"Exactly, so watch it with the tone," Lonnie's light, mocking, tone darkens.

"I'm not a little kid anymore," he bites back and feels Nancy put a hand on his back, strengthening him as he stares his father down.

Lonnie smirks and takes another long drag on the cigarette, exhaling smoke right in his face.

"Look at you, acting all tough in front of the girl. Like you've actually

manned up."

He doesn't dignify that with a response.

"Will then, how is he? Maybe there's hope for him too, if you didn't turn out queer?"

"Go to hell."

"What? Can I ask about my sons? Is that such a crime?"

"You don't care. You've never cared."

"That's not true."

"Yes it is."

"Hey I came when all that crazy shit went down."

"To get money."

"I came to the hospital."

"Once. To get money, again."

"Is it so wrong to want to sue the bastards who can't even identify a body correctly?"

"When it's all you care about," he's steadfast.

"Look at you, glad to see your balls dropped before you turned 18 at least," Lonnie continues his mocking.

"Fuck. You," he bites off before turning around and picking up the flat tyre and putting it in the trunk. Lonnie takes the opportunity to leer at Nancy again.

"You're pathetic," she tells him before getting back inside the car. Jonathan gets in on the other side and quickly drives off, leaving Lonnie in the dust.

"Sorry you had to see that," he says after a couple of minutes of silence, staring straight ahead and blinking rapidly.

"Sorry you had to live with that," she answers, taking one of his hands and not letting go for the rest of the way. She sees him wipe at his eyes several times but doesn't say anything, giving him time.

His house is quiet and dark when they get back, both Joyce and Will in bed. They sneak into his room and settle under the covers.

"When I was five I had this doll," Jonathan sits up and begins, unprompted, after a long silence. "It was my mom's, she'd had it as a kid and saved it. I found it one day and loved it. So she let me keep it if I was careful with it. So I was, really careful with it. But then Lonnie saw me playing with it and said that boys weren't supposed to play with dolls so he took it and threw it out. Right out in the garbage. I felt so bad for mom. I started to cry so he smacked me over the head. That was the first time. That I remember."

She sits up aswell and takes him in her arms and strokes his hair while he continues, words spilling out of him now.

"When I was seven he made me try out for Little League. But I couldn't even hit the ball so I didn't make the team. He'd been standing there, watching with Jerry Peterson's dad 'cause they were drinking pals. And Jerry knocked it out of the park. He was so embarrassed and disappointed and mad when we drove home. I told mom I got hit by the ball when she asked about the bruise. But she knew. Of course she knew. She always tried to put herself between us. Not that it stopped him."

He lets out a shaky breath.

"That was what he cared about. That you were a man, and that he looked like a good dad with a good son. To others. At home he just sat in front of the TV and yelled. Threw stuff if you bothered him. It was the same with my tenth birthday. He said I had to kill the rabbit because that's what a man does. And all his hunting buddies were watching. He looked so proud when I did it. Said 'Like father like son' and turned to all his friends. I held it together until we got home because I knew what was coming if I cried in front of his friends. It was not as bad if I just cried at home, he still got angry and... all, but..."

She tightens her hold of him.

"I think he kind of gave up on me after that. That was the worst. Because that meant he'd focus on Will. So I just... kept getting in the way. So that he wouldn't be able to..."

He's sobbing into the crook of her neck at this point, soaking her t-shirt that's really his.

"I'm sorry... I hate that he was there tonight... I hate how he looked at you... I hate him. I'm sorry I'm such a-"

"I love you," she interrupts him. She pulls back so she can see his face. "I love you," she repeats. Taking his face in her hands she kisses him firmly. "And I hate him, for what he did to you and Will and Joyce."

"I love you too. I'm sorry I'm such a mess," he gets out.

" 'cause boys don't cry?" She jokes, breaking at least a bit of the tension.

"Yeah," he almost manages a chuckle.

"I love that you do."

He averts his gaze, wiping at his eyes.

"Jonathan, seriously. I don't care if you're what Lonnie defines as a man. I care that you're a great human. You're a great brother, a great son and a great boyfriend. You're the strongest person I know."

"You are."

"No, you are. You're steady. We can lean on you and you carry us without a second thought. You protect us. And for the record I think that's what they say a man is 'supposed' to do. And you go above and beyond that."

He doesn't know what to say to that so he just buries his face in the crook of her neck again. She keeps stroking his hair.

"He has no idea how strong you are. How good you are. He's pathetic. Let him be sad and alone out there. You don't need him."

"I need you," he murmurs. "And mom and Will."

"And we need you. And we have each other. I'm not going anywhere."

"I love you," he says again. He's never been more sure of it.

"Love you too," she repeats back, kissing his cheek.

They lay back down, facing each other. She takes his left hand in hers, lining up their scars.

"I had a great time tonight, before..." he says softly.

"Me too. Screw him. The night's too good to be ruined by him."

He nods.

"This," she says, squeezing their scarred hands together tighter. "This is what matters."

20. You like who you like

Summer means no school, summer means working at The Hawk, summer means driving Will and his friends around. But most of all summer means he and Nancy are almost inseparable. Therefore summer is bliss. They can stay out late, very late, in their favorite secluded spots that are just for them. They can lie on the grass and talk about everything, anything, while watching the clear night sky. They can raid her parents freezer of ice cream before their little brothers can get to it and then eat it all on the roof, climbing in and out of her bedroom window. She can even talk him into skinny dipping in Satler's Quarry at midnight. They can do *whatever* ever they want, and what they want are each other.

Though right now he's alone in his room. He's trying to come up with a plan. He likes plans, he's good with plans. But mostly it's because Nancy is really good with plans and they make a good team. But for this he can't rely on Nancy. Since the plan is for Nancy's birthday. He wants it to be as great as it possibly can. Because it's Nancy. She deserves the world. He wants to give it to her, or as much of it as he can. He's certain though that she'd make a better job of taking the world herself. But, anything he could do for her, he would.

But he had a hard time determining what he'd actually do. He had ideas, but which would be the best? And what was actually doable? Hoping to be inspired he was listening to the latest mix tape he'd made for her – the seventh, all in all – and was flipping through photographs he'd taken of her. But maybe it was actually distracting. She often distracted him, it was just very hard to think sometimes when she looked at him like she did in this photograph for instance, which he took three weeks ago when they were out in the woods again. She'd stopped to pick some wildflowers because El loves flowers and she was tutoring her later. He'd snuck a photo of her, the sound of the shutter had made her look up at him. He'd taken this second photo just as she formed her face into a smirk he was well-familiar with.

He's shaken out of daydreaming about Nancy when there's a knock on his bedroom door. Will pokes his head inside.

"Hey."

"Hey buddy."

"Are you busy?"

"No, what's up?"

Will comes inside, closes the door and sits down next to him on the bed.

"Nothing much. What are you doing?" His little brother asks, looking at the photo in his hand and the one's on the bed.

"Nothing, just trying to come up with a plan."

"A plan?"

"For Nancy's birthday."

"Oh. When is it?"

"Four weeks from now."

"So you've got plenty of time."

"Yeah but I have to come up with something good. I want it to be perfect," he says, looking down at the photo again.

"You really love her," Will observes.

"Yeah," he answers. "Very much." It's not something he's talked about with others, though he supposes Will has overheard him and Nancy saying the L-word to each other plenty of times.

"How... is it? I mean uh, being in love..." Will stumbles over his words and looks a bit embarrassed at saying them.

"Oh," he's a little surprised at the question, and unsure of how to answer it. How to put words to what he's feeling. But he's always told Will that he can come to him with anything so he's determined to give an answer. "It's um... indescribable. I mean I... I just want to be with her all the time and I can't stop thinking about her and I'm

happy just thinking about her and I care so much about her I'd do anything for her and it's uh... so exciting, like, seeing her. But it's kind of hard to describe it. Everything, I mean."

"Cool," Will nods slowly. "Has it... changed? Like, did you feel all of that right away?"

"Oh, um... no I guess... it's just become deeper, with time. And a bit less nervewracking. I mean I, at first it's like... I've never been more nervous than when uh... when uh we started talking for real. I mean I kind of liked her before but then when we, you know, when we started hanging out more but we weren't together or anything it was... I was supernervous all the time but it was like nerves I still wanted... I still wanted to be around her even though I was nervous. And it went from kind of liking her to... really liking her to... well yeah, loving her. Like, fast."

"Cool," Wills repeats and nods again, lost in thought.

"What's going on?" He asks, intrigued as to why Will's suddenly asking this.

"Nothing."

"Come on, something's up."

"Well, yeah..."

"Do you have a crush on someone?"

"No! Well... no, maybe. I don't know."

"It's normal to have a crush, Will."

"I know... this isn't," he mumbles.

"Is everything okay? You can tell me anything, you know that right?"

"Right."

"If you like someone... you can tell me. Or not. You don't have to tell me anything. Who it is or anything. But you look like you want to

talk about it. With all these questions and everything."

"Well yeah... I mean it's just... Feeling, certain things. I mean, it's not like you and Nancy, I mean not that deep..."

"But there's someone you like?"

"Yeah... and it's just, kind of like you said, you're nervous around them but you want to be around them anyway and just... think a lot, about them but can't think straight, it feels like."

"Yeah, totally."

"And you can't stop thinking about them."

"Right, exactly. So... is it someone at school or?"

"No... at the art program," Will tells.

Will's art teacher had given them a tip of a regional summer arts program in Bloomington that she thought would be right up Will's alley and that actually had a fairly low entrance fee that was affordable for them between his and their mom's jobs plus the money they had now gotten from the Department of Energy as some kind of compensation for everything. It wasn't nearly enough for what they'd gone through and really they had been tempted to refuse it coming from them, but the reality was that they could really use the money. For stuff like this. So since school was out he, often accompanied by Nancy, drove Will over to Bloomington twice a week for the arts program. Will had loved it from the start, that was obvious from how he could talk about it the whole way back to Hawkins when they picked him up, and he'd shown some of the different artworks he'd been working on, which was awesome as usual. But apparently it was more than just the art that was exciting...

"Cool. That's great, Will. You don't have to tell me more if you don't want to."

"No I want to it's just... hard."

"Well, you can tell me anything, you know that."

"I know."

Will sits quietly for a couple of seconds. He doesn't say anything either. He'll never put pressure on Will. When he wants to tell him stuff, he will.

"It's a boy. I like. I think I'm... queer," Will suddenly says, all very quickly like he has to get it out once he's made his mind up. Now he just looks down, staring at his bed spread.

"That's great, Will," he says.

"What?" Will looks up at him.

"That you like someone," he elaborates. That's the important part, surely. It's not a huge shock for him, he's honestly wondered a little about Will, as he's never seemed the least bit interested in girls even as he's become older, getting to the age when he himself started to... really notice girls, and while his friends like Mike and Lucas and even Dustin obviously had become much more interested in girls over the past year, Will seemingly hadn't, always becoming more quiet whenever the subject came up.

"I'm queer... gay, a fag..."

"Don't say fag. And so what if you're queer. You like who you like."

Will doesn't say anything, just watching him, seemingly waiting for him to continue, so he does, laying out his thoughts on the subject. It drives him mad that people are so intolerant and obnoxious about this sort of stuff. He's never understood why. Just let people be.

"The only one who truly knows how you feel is you. No one else can tell you how you feel. No one can tell you how you're 'supposed' to feel," he says.

"But I... people are... I'm such a..." Will stammers.

"You're awesome, Will. Come here," he says and pulls his brother into a hug. Will is tense for a moment but then he can feel him relax. "I love you, Will. Nothing will ever change that. Certainly not this."

"I love you too," Will mumbles quietly. "I thought you'd be... I don't know. Mad or sad or something," Will says after he pulls away.

"Why would I? Will, there's nothing wrong with this. You like who you like, you feel how you feel."

"But it's so... weird... and people say... like dad, and Troy say things like..."

"Hey. People like dad and Troy are idiots, okay? They're the biggest idiots on the planet. They know nothing. People who think they can say how people are supposed to feel. Who think it's something wrong with liking someone. They're just idiots. Okay?" He lays it down clear.

"Okay..."

"Seriously. Dad is the biggest fucking idiot on the planet. Don't care about anything he ever said," he says, holding no bars regarding their father now, Will is old enough to hear it.

"Okay... I just... could they tell? I mean they've always called me fag and I guess on some level I've always known... I mean, I've... liked boys before but I tried to tell myself it wasn't... like that. But it's just become more and more like... undeniable. But how can they have known like..."

"They didn't know. They're assholes who bullies. Anyone who sticks out, anyone who isn't just a boring plain douche who conforms to the norm, they pick out and bully just because they're insecure in themselves. And just because you're kind and sensitive they called you fag because they're fucking idiots who thinks guys aren't supposed be like that, but strong and tough like they think they are. But they're not, they're the weak ones. You're strong."

"No..."

"Yes you are. The strongest. No one else has gone through everything you've gone through. And you came out on top. That seriously makes you the toughest person in the world."

Will doesn't say anything to that.

"And for the record people have called me that aswell, so. They have no clue about what's really going on."

"I just... Why do I have to be such a huge freak. Not just Zombie Boy but a fag too..."

"Stop saying that."

"Sorry."

"And well, if you weren't a freak yourself you would just be known as the freak's brother. I kind of screwed you over that way."

Will smirks a bit at that before turning serious again.

"You don't think it's... weird... or gross?"

"No, Will," he says with emphasis and puts an arm around him again. Will seems to finally let out a deep breath he'd been holding in.

"You've been sitting on that for awhile, huh?"

"Yeah," Will chuckles a little. "Feels good to... have said it."

"Good."

Will shifts, sitting up next to him against the headboard.

"Do you think I should tell mom?"

"If you want to."

"Well, I want to... I don't like hiding things from you guys... and it feels like I am. But I'm worried."

"About what?"

"How she'll react."

"Mom loves you more than anything in the world, Will. Nothing will ever change that."

"I know, I know. But she... I don't want her to worry about me even

more. And this..."

"Hm. I see your point, but I think she'll be more worried if she feels like you're hiding something. Plus it's kind of her job to worry about you."

"You're right. I'm more scared of telling the guys, though. What if they won't want to hang out with me anymore when they know I'm queer?"

"They will never stop being friends with you, you know that. They love you like crazy, this won't change anything. I know I barely have any friends, but I also know that no one else has friends like you've got. When you went missing they didn't care how dangerous it was, they wouldn't stop looking for you. And the same with the Mind Flayer."

Will nods.

"But you don't have to tell anyone if you don't want to."

"No I want to. It's like I'm breaking party rules."

"What rule?"

"Friends don't lie. Feels like I am. But I don't know how to tell them, everyone. It's kind of a big thing."

"Hm. How about starting with telling just Mike?" He suggests, knowing that even though Will was very close to all his friends, Mike was special.

"Good idea," Will nods.

"And I'll be with you."

"Thanks."

Getting up off the bed he changes the music, because the situation definitely calls for Bowie.

"So," he begins when he sits down next to Will again. "Tell me about

him."

"What?"

"The guy you like."

"Ugh, it's embarrassing," Will blushes.

"Come on, I spilled my heart out to you about Nancy, can't I at least get a name?"

"Simon. He's called Simon."

"Cool. So what do you like about him?" He smirks.

"Ugh," Will groans and looks away, embarrassed. He reaches out and ruffles his little brother's hair. "I just like him... he's fun to talk to even though I feel I say the wrong thing all the time and his art is really beautiful and he's cute," Will hastily says, lowering his voice on the last word like it's some great embarrassment to find someone cute.

"Cool, sounds nice. So you two talk a lot?"

"I don't know, I guess a bit..."

"Well that's good."

"What?"

"That you can talk to him."

"What do you mean?"

"Ask Nancy sometime if it was easy to get me to talk to her last year, before everything..."

"You didn't?"

"Barely. I was too nervous. You're playing it real smooth by comparison."

"Yeah, sure, real smooth..."

"So do you think he likes you too?"

"What? Why would he? That's ridiculous."

"No it's not. Maybe he does. It's no more ridiculous than Nancy liking me anyway."

"I don't know... can we talk about something else, please?"

"Sure."

"So what are your plans for Nancy's birthday?" Will makes sure to change the subject back.

"Oh. Well, I'm trying to figure out how to make it special. Thing is Mrs. Wheeler is definitely planning celebrations too so I either got to work with her or around that. So I'm trying to figure that out. I want it to be a big celebration because it's Nancy but I want us to have some time alone too."

"Isn't it best to work with Mrs. Wheeler for the party but then you surprise Nancy on your own the day before or something?" Will suggests.

He considers it for a moment.

"Yep. That's the smart solution. Will the Wise at it again..."

"Shut up. What will you give her?"

"Uh, I don't know. I mean, I've tracked down a book I really want her to have, but I want to get her something else too. Something nice, you know?"

"Right."

In the distance they can hear the front door open and their mom call out for them.

"In here!" He shouts back.

"Hey!" She says, poking her head inside.

"Hey," they answer in unison.

"All good in here?"

"Yeah," he answers and Will nods. "You? Good day?"

"Yeah. Hey, Nancy came into the store earlier so I invited her over for dinner."

"Oh, great," he answers.

"Can Mike come too?" Will asks.

"Fine by me, I'll call the Wheelers," she answers and disappears again.

"Hey just so you know, there's no hurry... to tell, I mean."

"I know, but I want to get it over with. I'm tired of keeping it a secret."

"Okay."

Mom pokes her head inside again.

"Mike's coming too."

"Great."

"What have you two been up to?"

"Nothing, just, talking," he answers.

"Okay," she smiles.

"Mom, I need to tell you something, " Will says.

"What is it, sweetie?"

"I'm queer. I like boys."

Will just blurts it out. He looks from his little brother to their mother. She doesn't say anything at first. She fully enters the room and sits down on his bed too.

"Oh, Honey," she begins, pulling Will into a hug. "That's okay."

"I know," Will says quietly.

"I'm so glad you told me. I don't want you to feel you have to hide things from me."

"You're okay with it?" Will asks.

"I mean it's... different, for sure, but... you're sure about how you feel, right?"

"Yes."

"Then that's how it is. No one else can tell you how to feel you-"

"I know, I know. Jonathan already said it."

"Oh. Good," she says, looking briefly to him. "Does anyone else know?"

"No, but I want to tell people... the Party, Nancy. I don't want to lie to them."

"You're not ly-"

"In a way I am, I think."

"That's why you wanted Mike to come for dinner?"

"Yeah, Jonathan thinks it might be easier that way, not telling everyone at once. Mike will understand. And Nancy."

"Smart," their mom nods.

"And it's okay if Hopper knows too... because... he's not like Dad, right?"

"No, no he's not like your father, no. Definitely not."

He and Will both nod in agreement. It's not like he's dying to have a stepdad but he likes Hopper. Trusts Hopper. He obviously cares about mom and Will. He's proven that. And him, he knows Nancy's right

about that. He vividly remembers that day at the morgue, when he thought Will was dead and his mom was going crazy. Hopper had put a hand on his back and offered some comfort on the worst day of his life.

"Well, I should get started on dinner," Mom begins before pulling them both into a hug. "I love you both, very much. Nothing will ever change that."

"Love you too mom," they both reply.

Nancy and Mike are both in a good mood when they come over, bickering and teasing each other. They have much more of a sibling rivalry than he and Will has, but it's become more good natured over the past year, he knows. Nancy seems a bit surprised though when he sits down opposite her at the table, next to Will. Usually he sits beside her because last time he sat opposite her she spent the whole dinner running her foot up and down his leg up until the point she got to his inner thigh which made him jolt and hit his knee on the underside of the table, causing the ketchup bottle to topple over and everyone look at him while she tried to contain her smirk.

Maybe she senses there's a reason he sits down next to Will – he just feels like he should be close to his little brother for support – so she leaves him and his leg alone. They talk normally over the dinner table, Mike excitedly talking about everything they've been doing with El – Hopper finally let up and went public with El, or Jane as she was known. The story was that she was Hopper's daughter who had been living with her mother until now, which had given the town something new to gossip about. But it had all gone smoothly, they could care less about what townspeople thought, the critical thing was that no one, including Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler, recognized El. Nancy had told him that their parents had been a bit perplexed as to Mike's sudden new friend but she had been able to bridge the gap by telling them that Hopper had hired her to tutor his previously homeschooled daughter some time ago and Mike had gotten to know her that way. Nancy reminds her brother, who seems to be planning to show El everything he possibly can in the whole world during this summer, that they might not have time for everything since Hopper has increased Nancy's tutoring hours with El even more now since they have more time and now have serious hopes to get El ready for

school in the fall.

"Hey, I want to tell you guys something," Will says towards the end of the meal, looking at Mike and Nancy. Will's voice is just a tiny bit shaky so he puts a hand on his back for support.

"What's up?" Mike asks while taking another bite of the chicken.

"I'm gay."

Will looks at Mike but it's Nancy who reacts first.

"That's great, Will," she smiles softly and reaches out, putting a hand on his little brother's arm for a second.

"Yeah, it's cool man," Mike then says.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah of course dude!" Mike exclaims and puts a hand on Will's shoulder. "Who cares? You're my best friend. That's what matters, and that will never change."

"You don't think it's gross?" Will asks.

"No," Mike shrugs before adding "I think they're gross," and gesturing between him and Nancy. Nancy promptly smacks her little brother over the head and Will snorts with laughter.

"Seriously Will, it means a lot that you told us," she then says.

"I knew you guys would understand," Will nods. "I want to tell the guys too but..."

"They'll understand too," Mike says.

"I know."

"Yeah," Nancy says. "Though I have to warn you now, just so you know: Boys are idiots," she smirks.

"Hey!" He, Mike and Will all say chorus.

"She's right," his mom shrugs, sharing a laugh with Nancy who sticks her tongue out at him. Will laughs again.

Will ends up telling Dustin, Lucas, Max and El later that week when they're all over at their house. He, Nancy and Mike are there too. When he says it they're all quiet for a second and Will looks anxious. Then El breaks the silence.

"That's okay Will, I like boys too."

She doesn't know why but El broke the tension. They all chuckle and Lucas and Dustin spring to life.

"Yeah it's cool dude," Dustin says.

"Yeah, friends forever, right?" Lucas says.

"Right," Will answers and Dustin forces the three of them into a group hug.

"Yeah, but boys suck, just so you know," Max smirks.

"I've already told him," Nancy butts in, exchanging a glance with the younger girl while Lucas looks slightly offended.

Next time he drives Will to the art program Nancy accompanies them again – she says it's to keep him company, he suspects it's only partly that and also the incentive of stopping at the ice cream parlor just outside Bloomington they found on one of their earlier drives. When they pull into the parking lot there's a couple of boys Will's age talking outside the building. They're walking towards the entrance but one of them stops and turns when he sees their car. Glancing in the rear view mirror he can see Will in the backseat hastily gathering his things while looking at the boy.

"Is that Simon?" He enquires.

"Um, yes," Will quickly answers.

"Who's Simon?" Nancy asks, very intrigued.

"A boy," Will answers even quicker, not looking at them. Simon now waves to them and Will awkwardly waves back. He raises his hand too, and Nancy does aswell. Will looks mortified.

"He's cute," Nancy notes.

"Yep, uh-huh, well um, I'll see you later," Will gets out before exiting the car.

"We'll pick you up same time as usual!" He calls after his little brother before the door closes.

Will quickly walks up to Simon, who smiles and says something. Will responds and they make their way inside.

"So, Simon?" Nancy begins as he pulls out of the parking lot.

"Yeah, he told me about him."

"So it's a little crush?"

"Yeah. Or maybe more than a little. He asked me a lot of questions..."

"Oh yeah? About what?" Nancy smirks.

"Uh, about us... and um, feelings, I guess..."

"And what did you tell him?" She pushes.

"Hey that's between me and him," he tries.

"Come on!"

"Strictly between brothers."

"Whatever," Nancy rolls her eyes. "But he talked to you about Simon?"

"Yeah."

"That's great. You know, that he comes to you for that. Mike will only talk to me about El if he needs my help with like getting her a Christmas present or something."

He shrugs.

"Seriously, you're the best big brother in the world."

He doesn't know what to say to that so he's quiet and turns the familiar route down to the ice cream place.

When they go to pick up Will he exits the building once again talking with Simon. Nancy nudges him and tells him to look, like that's not what he's already doing, then tells him to not look *too* much. Will and Simon say goodbye and Will walks to their car.

"Be cool," he whispers to Nancy when Will opens the door to the backseat.

"I'm cool, I'm cool," she assures.

"Hey buddy," he greets Will.

"Hey guys," he answers.

"Good day?"

"Yeah."

"So, tell me about Simon!" Nancy asks, turning around to look at Will. He smacks her lightly on the arm but she ignores him and Will just rolls his eyes.

"What do you want to know?" Will blushes.

"Well, what's he like?"

"He's smart... and funny. And his art is really good."

"And he's cute?" Nancy smirks.

"Yes," Will blushes even more.

"Where's he from?" He asks.

"Martinsville, but could you guys help me out here? I know there's no

chance he likes me but-

"Yes there is," he and Nancy say at the same time.

Will looks at them for a second before speaking again.

"It really freaks me out when you guys do that."

"Whatever," Nancy begins. "But of course there's a chance he likes you!"

"Come on," Will mutters.

"God, you guys undersell yourself way too much," Nancy sighs, pointing to both him and Will. "Will you're smart and funny and talented and cute, who wouldn't like that?"

"People who like girls?" Will deadpans, still blushing.

"Well we don't know what he's into!"

"Not me, I bet," Will mutters.

"Come on, he obviously likes you," Nancy insists.

"As a friend," Will objects.

"Well, maybe more. Come on, I'm not saying it's a sure thing I'm just saying don't rule it out."

"Okay so... for the absolutely miniscule chance that he would actually like me back... like how can I tell?"

"Hm, well... I mean there's a lot of different ways. But, you guys talk, a lot?"

"Yes. I don't know why he still talks to me, I just keep putting my foot in my mouth."

"Don't worry about it, that's how it feels when you're... liking someone. And see, he wants to talk to you! He talks more with you than with anyone else?"

"I don't know..."

"Or well, like this morning. He waited for you. Have you seen him wait for anyone else?"

"No..."

"See! He makes an effort with you."

"You really think so?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah buddy, just, play it cool, you know?" He tries to help.

"Is that what you did?" Will deadpans and it makes him go crimson and Nancy to burst out laughing.

"Sorry, sorry," she halts herself when he looks at her with a mocked-hurt look. "You were very cool."

"Yeah, so were you," he shoots back.

"Hey I still need help over here... what should I do?" Will asks, growing exasperated.

"Just keep doing what you're doing. You've got game," Nancy says.

"Game?" Will questions.

"Yeah, you're cool! Just keep it up. If you want maybe invite him to go someplace else? I mean hanging out outside of art class too. It doesn't have to mean anything. But you can maybe get a better read of him then."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Anytime."

"Have I got game?" He jokingly asks.

"Not really, so you're lucky you're so cute," Nancy teases and kisses his cheek.

A/N: So this chapter was sort of light on Jancy because of the nature of it, I had to do my take on Will coming out. Of it I just have to say 1) As I've said on Tumblr, Jonathan is obviously the first person he'd come out to, 100 %. 2) I did this positive coming out story because a) I feel all the people Will would CHOOSE to tell would be supportive in the way they are here b) My sweet boy has been through enough and deserves to be happy c) I'm tired of coming out stories especially in this fandom where it's more negative and dramatic, therefore I wanted this to be more positive and Will struggling not so much with his sexuality (though of course a little bit of that) as with experiencing a major crush (I haven't decided yet what the outcome of it, if any, will be btw). It's not based on anything from real life but sort of written with my older brother's, my best friend's and several other friends coming out stories in my mind and positive and negative aspects of them in their view.

21. Happy, lately

One day while Nancy is over at the cabin tutoring El, he seizes the opportunity to go over to the Wheeler household. Mrs. Wheeler looks surprised when she opens the door.

"Oh hello, Jonathan, Nancy is out tutoring, I thought you knew that?"

"Hi, yes I know but I didn't come here to see her, I wanted to talk to you, Mrs. Wheeler."

"Please, call me Karen. What do you want to talk to me about?"

"Nancy's birthday."

Karen beams at him and ushers him into the kitchen to discuss it.

"Well, last year she didn't want it to be anything special, but now we really should," Karen begins.

"I agree."

"Her grandparents wants to come of course, and my sister and her family from Minnesota. So I thought we'd have a big party, of course with you and all her friends too."

"Oh, great."

"Um, do you know who her friends are now, by the way? I really only see you around here now. Since Barbara..."

"Oh uh, well. There's Haley, and Carrie," he quickly mentions the two closest friends Nancy have now. After all the drama she decided she was done with pretending to be friends with people who cared more about their social status than anything real. Haley and Carrie were two who like them didn't care for all the high school drama Carol and her bunch stirred up, so their friendships survived, even if it was much more casual than what Nancy had with Barb. But they were nice and studied with them sometimes or sat with them at lunch those times they ate in the cafeteria instead of his car or the darkroom. They've seen them around a bit now during the summer

though he and Nancy for the most part preferred to just have each other's company.

"Oh, and I guess Steve too. It's um, well we're still friends with him, you know."

"Oh, that's great. I'll invite them then. Oh and I wanted to ask you, your mom and Will are of course very welcome if they..."

"Yes! Absolutely, they love Nancy," he quickly answers.

"Oh I'm glad. And we love having you over, Jonathan."

"Thanks. Um, and I think you could invite El- I mean, Jane, too. Nancy really likes her."

"Oh, how nice! Yes I'll do that then. I might as well let Mike bring his little friends too otherwise he'll just complain and want to leave anyway."

"Good idea," he smiles. "And if you need any help with the preparations, I'll of course..."

"Oh, you're too sweet! I think I can take care of the food and the cake by myself, but if you would like to help with the decorations I would really appreciate it."

"Oh, definitely. I can get Will to help, he's really good at making that sort of stuff. You know, so it's a bit more personalized than just store bought?"

"Well that sounds perfect! He's really very talented, your brother."

"Yes, he is."

"And you too! You know, Nancy has shown me some of your photos, they are really wonderful!"

"Oh, thank you. Thank you very much," he answers while blushing at the praise. He gathers himself for the next part. "Um, also about the party... we have it during the day right? Because um, well I wanted to uh, just me and her during the evening um... well I sort of wanted

some time for just us, I mean..." he gets out awkwardly.

His heart beats out of his chest as Karen looks at him.

"Well of course, I get that!" Karen smiles wide at him. "You kids should have fun!"

"Thanks," he answers, a bit surprised at how easy that went.

"Would you like something to drink? Ginger ale?" Karen offers.

"Sure, that'd be great," he answers.

She hands him the can and he takes a drink.

"You guys are being safe, right?" She asks and he promptly chokes on his drink.

"Y-yes," he coughs out while she smirks.

"I figured. Just so you know, you don't have to keep sneaking in through the window," she continues and he goes bright-red.

"I-I don't sneak in-" he tries.

"Jonathan, give me some credit here. I'm not mad. As long as you guys are being safe and responsible."

"Uh-um, we are, yes," he answers automatically, feeling more embarrassed than ever before.

"Then it's fine. In any case, I know what it's like, I was young once too. It's not like separating teenagers at night would you stop you, you know. I remember once when me and-" Karen continues but thankfully cuts herself short when she notices his raised eyebrows and red cheeks. "You know what, that's not important. Anyway, just be safe and um, yeah."

"... thanks," he slowly answers, uncomfortable at the situation and shocked at how laidback Karen is. She seems to pick up on it.

"Jonathan Byers, you must realize that you've been coming around

here since you were little to pick up your brother. So I've had the pleasure of seeing you grow up from a nice little boy to a responsible young man. I trust you, I trust Nancy. And you make her so happy, happier than I've ever seen her. That's all a mother can wish for."

"Thank you..." he mumbles, overwhelmed.

The cold wakes her. Or well, it's not that cold considering it's the middle of summer, but she was definitely warmer before, when she fell asleep. Because then she was snuggled up with Jonathan. Now she's alone in bed, she sees as her eyes peer open and she stretches her body. He must've already snuck back out through the window. She's a little disappointed that he didn't wake her up to say goodbye. Not that it matters, she'll see him again in a few hours. Then she forgets all about it when she remembers what day it is. She turns 17 today. A pretty useless age, she feels.

She wonders what her mom has planned. Last year she herself hadn't been in the mood to celebrate, all she could think about was that Barb wasn't there like she used to be. Like she was supposed to be. She stayed in bed for most of the day, she blamed bad migraines. Her mom came up with a piece of cake anyway and sat with her which was sweet, and thankfully she understood that she didn't want to talk about it and so she didn't pry. She made her mom send Steve away when he came around in the evening to take her out to the movies. She just couldn't deal with that then either. He just didn't understand.

This year she felt better. She still missed Barb sorely, there would always be a gaping hole in her heart. But it wasn't huge and gaping and raw. Not any longer. Jonathan had been right, all those months ago. It didn't get worse with time, it did in fact get slightly better. Shutting down the Lab, getting justice had helped her deal with it in some way. Having a grave she could go to, which she still did regularly, helped too. Having someone to talk to, someone who understood, that helped most of all.

Thinking about him brings a smile to her face. She wonders if he has got anything planned for today. He's been very secretive about it. She knows her mom must've planned a proper celebration this year, and she's actually really excited about that, but most of all she wants to

spend it with Jonathan.

It's impossible for her to go back to sleep now even though it's early. So she gets out of bed and goes to the bathroom before making her way downstairs dressed in the pair of boxers and The Clash t-shirt that she slept in, they're really Jonathan's but she's laid permanent claim to them now. They're comfy and smells like him. She walks quietly so not to wake anybody.

Her caution turns out to be completely unnecessary when she steps into the kitchen. Her dad is yawning behind the morning paper, Mike sits slumped against the table looking half-asleep and Holly is in her high-chair eating yoghurt. By the counter her mom is putting a flower in a small vase onto a tray that also has got a plate of pancakes, a glass of orange juice, a cup of coffee and a cupcake with a candle waiting to be lit on it. And by the stove Jonathan stands, flipping another pancake while more rests on a pile on another plate by the stove.

To say the least, she's very surprised to see him there. Very pleasantly surprised.

"Wha-what's going on?" She asks as she treads over the threshold. Everyone turns around, surprised.

"Oh, shit," Jonathan curses.

"You're up!" Her mom calls out, looking completely caught out. "I thought we'd have more time," she then whispers to Jonathan.

"I did too!" He whispers back.

Then they all find themselves and call out:

"Happy birthday!"

"What's all this?" She smiles as Jonathan makes his way over to her.

"We were going to surprise you with breakfast in bed," he explains, putting an arm around her, giving her a sidehug and a quick kiss, clearly a bit uncomfortable with being more affectionate than that when her whole family is watching. "Happy birthday," he says again.

"Thanks," she smiles and looks up at him and gives him a curious look. He just smiles and shrugs.

"Happy birthday Sweetheart," her mom comes over and hugs her too.

"Happy birthday!" Holly excitedly calls from her chair, and she smiles at her little sister. Mike and her dad repeats the sentiment too.

"Can we finally eat now since she's up anyway?" Mike then begs, looking very much to have been forced out of bed at this early hour.

"Yes," her mom says.

"Sit down, sit down," Jonathan says and pulls her chair out when she goes to do it. She rolls her eyes and smirks at him. What a dork. My dork, she thinks.

After breakfast she receives presents from her parents and Mike. Jonathan says she'll get his later and holds his poker face when she tries to pry it out of him. Her parents (or well, her mom) get her a dress, some makeup and a nice new notebook. Mike surprises her, she gets a collection of Roald Dahl works from him. It's really sweet, she loved Dahl as a kid, especially *Matilda* and when Mike was little she read Roald Dahl books for him sometimes, before they grew out of it. But she never forgot, apparently neither did he. She goes to have a shower and get dressed. She throws on a summerdress and does her makeup and puts her hair in a sort of half-up do with some curls spilling down. When she comes back downstairs she finds the kitchen deserted, but Holly comes tumbling in and tugs on her dress, clutching a paper in the other hand. She picks up her baby sister.

"I made you present!" Holly exclaims.

"Oh wow, did you?"

"It's a picture!" Holly continues and hands her the paper in her hand. She looks at the drawing. It depicts what looks like a woman with curly hair and a man with shorter brown hair holding hands, a smaller person beside them and a house in the background and the sun shining in the top right corner.

"That's you and that's Jonathan," Holly explains, pointing at the woman and the man holding hands.

"Aw, that's sweet. Is that you?" She asks, pointing at the smaller person next to them in the drawing.

"No that's your baby, for later."

"Oh," she's a bit caught off-guard by that. Everything is simple and straightforward for Holly still. "Well thank you so much!" She says and gives her sister a kiss, she squeals in delight before demanding to be put down.

She peeks out into the backyard and sees Jonathan, Mike and her dad setting up a long table and chairs to her mom's instructions. When she's satisfied that they'll set it up right her mom turns around and walks inside, spotting her.

"Hey Sweetheart," she greets.

"Hey."

"You look gorgeous. I like it when you wear your hair like that."

"Thanks."

"So, since it's supposed to be nice weather all the day I figured we could sit outside."

"Sounds great."

"Your father will go and pick up Nana soon, and Granma and Grandpa should be here around noon. Aunt Helen too. We told the rest to come during the afternoon, we invited the Byers, Haley and Carrie and Steve, Jonathan said you were still friends?"

"Yes, yes we are, that's good."

"Yes, I think that's very mature of you. Oh, and Jonathan said we should invite that girl you've been tutoring, Jane? He said you're quite fond of her?"

"Yes, yeah she's sweet."

"That's nice. Oh, and I told Mike he could bring his friends, you know how he gets otherwise, he'll just get antsy."

"Yeah yeah, that's good. They're sweet."

Her mom just stands and watches her with a smile for a second without saying anything.

"What?" She has to ask.

"Nothing, Sweetie, it's just... my little baby is not so little anymore," she says and pulls her into a hug.

"Mom..." she rolls her eyes but snickers.

"Seriously though, I'm so proud of you. You've been through so much... with Barbara, but you're so strong. And I'm so glad, you've seemed so happy, lately."

"Yeah... yeah. Thanks, mom. Love you."

"Love you too, Sweetie."

"What's that?" Her mom asks after pulling back a little, looking at the drawing still in her hand.

"Oh, Holly's present to me. It's me, Jonathan and apparently our future child," she smirks.

"Aw," her mom coos a bit before laughing. Then she turns more serious. "He seems to make you really happy."

"Yeah... he does. He's... yeah, he's great."

"He is. I'm so glad you two found each other. It's... it's rare, what you two have," her mom says and gets something wistful in her eye.

"Yeah... it is. I know."

"Oh by the way, I told Jonathan, so I figured I should tell you two, I don't know if he's told you but, you don't have keep having him

sneaking in through the window-"

"He doesn't-" she automatically starts protesting while going beatred.

"Sweetie, please, I'm not as clueless as you may think. Anyway, I trust you. I trust Jonathan. I trust you guys are safe and responsible. You are, right?"

"Y-yes."

"So... I think you can have him use the front door instead. It's pointless anyway to try and keep you from having sex, I mean-"

"Mom!"

"Right, right. Just, be safe."

"We will-, wait when did you talk to Jonathan?! About *this*?!"

"Well who do you think helped me plan the party? He came over on Monday when you were tutoring."

"Oh."

She opens her mouth to say something more, but is interrupted by Jonathan himself entering the kitchen.

"We're all set up outside," he informs them.

"Oh that's great, thanks a lot," her mom smiles at him before glancing at the clock on the wall. "I should actually start preparing in here now," she then says.

"Do you need any help with the food?" Jonathan immediately offers.

"No no, Sweetie, thanks. You two go and have fun," her mom answers and sends them out of the kitchen.

"Did my mom talk to you about sex?" She hisses to Jonathan while they walk out into the backyard. Her dad has gone to pick up Nana and Mike has disappeared off somewhere.

"Yes."

"And you survived?"

"I'll be honest, it nearly killed me. I've never been more uncomfortable in my life. And that's saying something," he admits with a half-smile.

She pokes him in the ribs.

"Since when do you plan stuff with my mom, by the way?"

"Well, since this was the one thing I couldn't turn to my favorite little schemer for," he begins and presses a kiss to her temple while she playfully pouts at him for calling her little. He smirks before continuing. "I had to turn to the next-best thing," he smiles.

"I'm not little," she continues to jokingly pout.

"Fine, how 'bout 'petite'?"

Before she can answer he promptly picks her up and throws her over his shoulder. She yelps in surprise before laughing while steadying herself with her arms against him.

"Jonathan!"

"What?" He laughs and spins her around.

People start to drop in and shy, nervous Jonathan bravely faces the onslaught of her relatives who now meet him for the first time. Nana gushes over Jonathan, who smiles politely. Granma keeps asking Grandpa if he's seen how "tall and handsome Nancy's special someone is". It's sweet but gets kind of grating after a while. They stick together and it gets easier when the others show up.

"Happy birthday," El smiles and hands over a gift.

"Thank you," she smiles at the younger girl and takes it. She opens it to find several new eye shadows inside. It's really sweet, she wonders if El has memorized all her colors from the now numerous times she's let the younger girl pick and choose from her vanity.

"Thank you, these are great," she smiles wider and hugs El.

Then Hopper surprises her by handing over an envelope.

"Oh, thanks, I didn't expect-" she starts but he cuts her off.

"Well, it's something you should have. Oh, and thanks for all your help with Jane. Happy birthday, kiddo," he says and scratches his neck.

Inside the envelope she finds a document. She reads it and finds that she now is a licensed gun owner in the State of Indiana.

"How-" she starts but again Hopper cuts her off.

"I have my ways. Figure you've earned it. Don't show it to your parents."

"I won't... thanks," she smiles.

Everyone nicely mingles and she's quite content with life at the moment, the sun shining, everyone getting along and no one in danger. After dinner and cake and all she sneaks inside with Jonathan for some alone time.

"You having fun?" He asks.

"Yes," she answers truthfully before locking her arms around his neck and kissing him. "Thanks for this. Being here, the whole day. That's been the best."

"Well, day's not over yet," he smiles softly and kisses her back.

"What do you mean?"

"Want to get out of here soon? Just the two of us."

"Yes," she answers, intrigued, and kisses him again.

"Oh," a new voice sounds and they break apart to find Will looking at them with his hands behind his back. "Sorry," he adds.

"No worries," she smiles at him. "What's up?"

"Uh, well I have a gift for you. I didn't want to give it to you before, um, in front of everyone."

"Aw, you didn't have to get me a gift!"

"No, I know, but I wanted to... uh, I... I hope you like it, if not it's okay, it's um... uh, well here," Will stops his nervous fidgeting and holds out a manila envelope. She takes it with a smile.

She opens it and inside she finds a drawing. A drawing of Barb. Barb's face smiles up at her and the likeness is uncanny, he must've used one of Jonathan's yearbooks for reference. She instinctively covers her mouth with her hand and can feel her eyes well up and soon she's crying.

"I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry! I thought-" Will starts to hurriedly apologize when he sees her reaction but she instantly pulls him into a tight embrace.

"No it's good, it's great," she chokes out and hugs him tighter while trying to collect herself a bit. "I just wasn't expecting it. It's beautiful. Thank you thank you thank you," she says and hugs him more.

"You're welcome," Will says quietly while hugging her back.

"This is how I want to remember her," she says. He nods.

"You're too sweet, Will. And way too talented," she says, finally releasing Will while wiping at her eyes.

She looks between Will and Jonathan, the latter of whom now rubs a hand up and down her back while looking at her and Will in awe.

"How do I look?" She asks.

"Beautiful," both brothers answer at the same time.

She rolls her eyes, shakes her head, sighs and smirks all at once. They really are too sweet.

"Thanks, but I meant do I have runny mascara or anything?"

"Oh! A little," Jonathan lets her know.

"Okay," she smiles. "I'm going to fix that, and put this in my room", she waves Will's drawing in her hand. "Then we can go?"

"So uh, it's not um, anything special. Uh, where we're going, I mean. I just... wanted you for myself for a while too," he says while starting the engine and driving away.

"Everything's special with you," she smiles.

"Not true, but okay."

"Yes it is," she insists and nestles into his side on the bench seat. He puts one arm over her shoulders while steering with the other.

He drives to the outskirts of town, and it takes her a while to figure out that the only place he could be heading to is Sattler's Quarry. He drives up the dirt road along the forest with the quarry, that looks more like an abyss from their viewpoint, to their left. An odd choice, but a good one since it gives them privacy, there's no one else around than the only person she wants to be with right now. He parks the car and they get out. He goes to get something out of the trunk so she walks up to the edge and stares down at the water 200 feet below. Thinks about the Lab people making a fake body and dumping it there. She picks up a small rock and drops it down, counting Mississippi's until she can hear a quiet splash. The setting sun colors the sky and is reflected in the water all the way down there.

"Not anything special," she smirks at him when she hears his footsteps approach. "This may be the only beautiful spot in town, and it's only at this time," she continues, looking at the sunset.

"I just took an outside shot, hoped for the best and prayed it wouldn't rain," he smirks right back at her.

He puts down a blanket and they sit down, feet dangling over the edge because she can't resist, she likes being right at the edge. The backpack he apparently produced from the trunk he puts down on

the ground next to him and from it he pulls out a champagne bottle.

"Got Eric to go in for me. It's not the real deal it's the cheap stuff that people can actually afford but hey, it sparkles and I'm willing to bet it tastes kind of the same," he explains to her raised eyebrows.

"Wouldn't know the difference," she smiles while he takes out a corkscrew and two regular drinking glasses she recognizes from the Byers kitchen and gets to work on opening the bottle.

It makes a nice echo, the pop of the cork coming off the bottle. She holds up the glasses as Jonathan quickly pours. She gives him one and he raises it in a toast.

"To my favorite *petite* schemer," he smirks and she rolls her eyes. "Happy 17th," he finishes. She clinks their glasses together. They take a drink. She leans over and kisses him, tasting the sweet alcohol on his lips.

"A pretty useless age, considering. Missed the election and still can't drink legally," she notes.

"Beats 16, though."

"I guess. Well, not really because then you got to drive, finally."

"You had a good day?"

"Yeah, thanks. A lot better than last year."

At his questioning eyebrows she elaborates.

"I missed Barb last year, terribly. And you. Now I miss her a bit less. And I have you."

She puts her head on his shoulder and they watch the sunset in silence for a while.

"You want your gift?"

"Ooh, yes!" She giddily answers, getting her head of his shoulder.

He goes digging in his backpack again.

"Okay, it's a two-parter. Uh, first this," he says and holds out a rectangular shaped gift. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks," she smiles and unwraps it. It's a book, an old book. "*Ten Days in a Mad-House* by Nellie Bly?" She reads off the cover. The name vaguely rings a bell.

"She was a pioneering investigative journalist, the best in the world. Once she went down the Niagara Falls in a barrel. Another time she convinced her publisher to finance a trip where she'd go around the world in 80 days like in that Jules Verne book, to test if it was doable. Think she did it in 73 days or something. And then this is... she feigned mental illness to go undercover in an insane asylum to investigate and expose how horribly they treated people there."

"Awesome."

"Yeah. So, since you've been talking about maybe doing journalism later I thought... well, if you do it, you're gonna be the best in the world so I thought you'd enjoy this."

"I love it, thank you," she says and kisses him again. She reads the inner notes and sees that it's an old first edition. "How did you even find this?"

"It took some digging," he smiles.

She looks at him in awe. She has told him about how she's been thinking about journalism for college, ever since Murray's she's thought about it a lot. She liked exposing the Lab, getting the truth out there. She was good at it. So why stop? She had told him and he listened attentively as always. And then he comes up with this, obviously putting a lot of thought and effort into it, and gets her something she doesn't have, that she wouldn't get for herself but that she now instantly feels she really needed.

She puts the book down when he holds out another, smaller gift. Inside she finds a small box. She lifts the lid. It's a silver necklace. She lifts it up. At first she thought the attachment was a simple heart-

shape, but looking closer she sees that in fact it is a small revolver and a nailbat that combines to make a sort of asymmetrical heart-shape. She's momentarily breathless.

"H-how-" she begins, looking at him.

"Do you like it?" He asks, looking a bit nervous and she can't fathom why.

"I love it! But how... where did you find this?"

"Well uh, I wanted to get you something... nice, but also personal. Um, I couldn't find anything that felt remotely good enough for you. Anyway when I gave Will a ride to Simon's house, you know they've hung out a couple of times now, Simon's mom insisted I'd stay for a cup of coffee. Turns out Simon's artistic streak comes from her, she makes jewellery. She was really nice so we got to talking and I told her how hard it was to find something perfect for you. She said she maybe she could make something. She asked me what I had in mind and I thought about this because... well I thought about how badass you are, basically. We drew it up. Luckily she didn't ask too many questions about it. And she gave me the friends and family discount."

"You are..." she starts, shaking her head in disbelief. She's not sure how to sum him up. "... just, amazing," she finishes.

"You are," he insists.

"Help me put it on," she says and hands him the necklace. She sweeps her hair out of the way and leans into his touch when he puts it on her.

"Not to state the obvious, but I really really love you a lot," she says when he's done.

"Same," he laughs before capturing her lips again.

He lays down on his back on the blanket, she lays down with her head on his shoulder.

"So how's it going for Will? With Simon, I mean. I meant to ask him but forgot."

"Oh, alright I think. But they're just friends."

"Aw, I remember when we were 'just friends'," she snickers and he chuckles.

They lay in a comfortable silence for a while.

"Hey," she gets her head up from his chest so she can look at him, resting her weight on an elbow. "This not anything new really, but just, my mom said it to me today so I've thought about it a lot. I've been really happy lately. And the main reason why is you. So just... thanks, for that. For making me happy."

She smiles down at him, he looks up at her with tenderness. He caresses her arm while answering.

"I... I'm glad. Really glad. I like making you happy. I want you to always be happy. And um... same. You know. With me, I mean. Will says he's never seen me smile as much as I've done this year... he's probably right."

She leans down and puts her lips to his. His arms goes around her, holding her close.

They end up laying there for hours, talking, laughing, kissing. Being silent with each other. After the sun has set they lay back and watch the starfilled night sky. It's just a bit of chill in the air, and it's easily fought off by Jonathan wrapping his arms around her.

"Let's go home," she eventually whispers.

"Do you want to...?" She begins to ask when he pulls up outside her house.

"Duh," he says with a smirk and swings his door open and runs around to her side to open the door for her too before she can react. She rolls her eyes at his chivalry before kissing him again, hungrily.

Together they walk up hand in hand and use the front door.

22. The freaks who walk among you

Four weeks before the start of school Joyce decided enough was enough. She wasn't having El live in that cabin in the woods anymore. "She needs a real home", she told Hopper in her no-nonsense voice. A real home meant the Byers home which is the perfect home for El, Nancy thinks. Joyce's original idea was for Will to bunk with Jonathan – a prospect honestly neither she nor Jonathan really was fond of, but anything for the family and El of course.

But then El and Will insisted on the two of them sharing Will's room instead. They had grown very close over the past year. Their connection ran deep already and now they had hung out almost as much as, if not even more, than El and Mike even. Since she was over at the Byers house all the time anyway. So instead that's what happened, Hopper went out and bought a bunkbed – which excited both El and Will very much. "It will be like camp!" Will exclaimed and El was very giddy, Lucas had explained the concept of summer camp to her earlier which had interested her greatly. It was sweet. El slept on the top bunk, Will on the bottom and they talked into the night until Joyce or Hopper told them to quiet down. While at the same time she and Jonathan tried to be quiet as mice in his room...

Hopper and Joyce were "still taking it slow" but El moving in had kind of meant Hopper doing it too. Not outright at first. But Jonathan had finally gone to Joyce and told her that he was fine with it, Will was fine with it and obviously El was more than fine with it, Hopper moving in, so if she wanted it too, it should happen. It kind of happened then.

It being their senior year of high school also meant that it was their little brothers freshman year. It was kind of weird being in the same school as Mike again, but it was not bad really. They still weren't at the "from now on we tell each other everything" level but they had definitely become closer since last fall. Being with Jonathan, seeing up close how amazing he is as a big brother to Will inspired her a bit. Her and Mike's relationship was of course totally different than Jonathan and Will's, the Byers didn't have any sibling rivalry like

they did. And she damn sure wasn't going to drop the rivalry with Mike. But they could keep it but not be at each others throats constantly. They could actually like, talk too.

It was not only Mike, Will, Dustin, Lucas and Max's first year of high school. It was also El's first year of school, period. Through her intense tutoring and El's natural intelligence they had managed to get her sufficiently up to speed so she could go to high school with her friends. Nancy felt so proud over El, and a bit of herself too, when the girl came by with Hopper to excitedly let her know that she had passed the tests she had to do to get in to high school after being "homeschooled" up until that point, as the story Hopper sold the school on went. She still tutors El after school and studies with her if they both have a free period since El is desperate to learn more and more. She makes for a great study partner, she's inclined to the same kind of natural curiosity that Nancy herself has. Simply wanting to know as much as possible. Nancy doesn't understand people who don't want to know as much as possible, about anything and everything.

Joyce and Hopper had given El strict "no powers at school" rules. Hopper had also tried to tell her not to draw attention to herself, but as the rest of them had informed him, as the new kid who – as was the official story – was Hopper's daughter who had up to now lived with her mom, she would be noticed. At least starting school at the same time as the rest of the Party and all the other freshmen helped her blend in a bit.

During the first week she and Jonathan once chose to forego eating lunch on the hood of his car, like they usually do for privacy, to instead sit with their little brothers and the rest of the Party in the cafeteria.

"So how's freshman year treating you guys?" She throws the question out to the table.

"Just great," Mike deadpans.

"Yeah, feels great to be back to being the smallest nerds to pick on again," Dustin adds.

"And AV Club sucks here," Lucas tacks on.

"I miss Mr. Clarke," Will shrugs.

"I like it," El smiles.

"It's as boring as middle school. No, worse actually because these bitches won't stop complaining," Max says and points her fork at the boys.

"I told you, tell us if assholes bully you," she says and Jonathan nods.

"They don't really, they're just idiots," Mike says.

"Hm. But you're liking school, El?"

"Yes!"

"That's great, what do you like the most?"

"English, History, Math, Biology-"

"She likes everything," Max rolls her eyes but smiles at El who shrugs and returns the smile.

A couple of weeks into it now and so far Nancy's enjoying senior year. The horror that was losing Barb and not being able to talk about it had made sophomore year and the first part of junior year miserable. But after being able to give her parents some closure last fall it felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She still missed Barb terribly, but it did get easier over time. The wound still very much there, but not as raw as it had once been. She was happy. She had come out of that crazy Halloween weekend determined to stop retreating, stop lying to herself and embrace who she was even when she wasn't a hundred percent sure of who that was.

She used to be Nerdy Nancy. Hanging with Barb, studying and keep up her GPA was her main interests and what she was known for. Her relationship with Steve was in hindsight a trainwreck, marked by bad communication from both sides and it wasn't good for either of them, definitely not for her. It had felt suffocating, she had to hide her true

feelings because she couldn't talk to Steve about it. He didn't understand, and didn't want to deal with it, everything, that had happened. Didn't really understand, about Barb. One thing the relationship did bring though was a new status within the hierarchy of high school, as the girlfriend of King Steve she was suddenly more than just Nerdy Nancy. Her and Jonathan's relationship had made her standing in the hierarchy plummet again but she didn't give a damn about that. Why care about what a bunch of idiots she didn't even like thought of her? She was sure they had only accepted her earlier because of Steve. And unlike how it was with Steve, her relationship with Jonathan was great. It didn't feel suffocating, it felt like she was flourishing, in part from being with him. Because of how they could talk. About everything. Including stuff like Barb and everything that happened. Everything they had done. Everything they still could do.

With Steve it felt like she had to be someone else. With Jonathan she felt like she could be herself. Not the Queen to Steve's King, not Nerdy Nancy (though she still was a total nerd apparently, according to Mike, the biggest geek in the world). Just Nancy.

After the fight with Tommy H. and Carol last year all the comments, whispers and stares they got started to mellow out. Maybe the novelty wore off. And then came graduation not only for Steve but also for Tommy H. and Carol who had always been the ringleaders of people being horrible to Jonathan and her. Now people tended to leave them alone more.

They have a free period now before lunch now, she and Jonathan. Jonathan spends it in the darkroom as usual, he's working hard at building up his portfolio to the max ahead of college applications. Sometimes she joins him in there. Now she'd been studying in the library – with her own college applications in mind as always. They would meet up later to have lunch on his car per usual.

She spots Will now further down the hallway. Mike and the others have P.E. class, but not Will. A long term effect of his time spent in the Upside Down was that he developed asthmatic symptoms which only really acted up during physical exertion so Joyce had been able to secure a permanent permission slip from P.E. class for Will. Which apparently was the envy of all his friends (except El who loved P.E. like she loved all the subjects). She had even overheard Dustin

remark that the slip almost made it worth going to the Upside Down.

He seems to be on his way from the library, carrying a bunch of papers in his hand. She guesses he spends his free periods there drawing, she must've missed him. He really is very talented. And so sweet. The drawing he made of Barb has a permanent spot on her nightstand. And the art he'd made of her and Jonathan together for Jonathan's birthday is proudly displayed on the wall in Jonathan's bedroom. They both love it. Now she watches with apprehension as a group of older boys approach Will.

"Hey Zombie Boy!" The one who seems to be the ringleader, calls out loudly, causing quite a few people in the hallway to turn around. Will looks down at the floor and stops as they block his path.

Goddamnit. She feels anger flare up inside of her as the taunting continues. She puts her books away in her locker quickly and slams it shut, already on her way over there when one of them shoves Will hard into the lockers, causing him to drop his papers. And the whole hallway full of people is just watching.

"Hey Asshole!" She calls out as she positions herself between Will and the bullies, squaring up with the leader. She thinks they're sophomores and she recognizes the leader but can't remember his name, she doesn't exactly pay attention to sophomore boys. He's taller than her and looks surprised to get called out.

"What?"

"Leave him alone. Or else we're going to have a problem."

"Is that so?" He crosses his arms, seemingly trying to keep hold of the situation.

"Yeah. You're pathetic" she looks him up and down. "Oh by the way, you should really consider using a stronger deodorant. Now I realize why all the sophomore girls turn away from you."

She's bullshitting him of course, she has no idea what the sophomore girls does, but it gets the desired effect as some of the on-lookers giggle and he looks around, flustered. He looks back at her,

seemingly searching for a comeback.

"You're Frogface's sister! So just because you're screwing the faggot's freak brother you-"

Maybe you'd have to factor in the element of surprise but she must've connected pretty good anyway as the punch knocks the jerk to the ground promptly and he stays down as the crowd erupts in "Oooooo"s. She leans down.

"I told you we would have a problem. Now. Leave him, my brother and their friends alone, got it?" He doesn't answer. "GOT IT?!" She demands.

"Y-yes," he mumbles.

"Same goes to you," she adds and eyes his followers. They just nod. She turns around and helps Will gather up his drawings.

"Let's go."

She leads him outside, out of sheer habit over to Jonathan's car, as always parked as secluded as possible to give them some privacy for lunch. They sit down on the hood.

"You alright?"

"Yeah, thanks," he says, looking slightly embarrassed.

"They bother you a lot?"

"Sometimes. I mean... I don't... they, yeah." She looks at him quizzically, encouraging him to elaborate.

"It's like... I don't care what they say, not really. I know they're just stupid assholes and it's like Jonathan says, it's good to be a freak. But at the same time... I don't know, I just wish they'd leave me alone. And for people to stop staring and whispering."

She nods.

"I know. I've felt like that. I mean, I'm sure you have it much worse

but, you know."

He nods in turn.

"And... I mean, I really appreciate what you did but I wish I wasn't such a coward, that I could stand up for myself. Sorry but it's kind of pathetic to have to have your brother's girlfriend as your body guard."

She nods, smiling a bit at the shy boy's sudden stream-of-consciousness, appreciating that he feels he can speak honestly with her.

"Will, you're not a coward. You know that, I know that. Jonathan and everyone else that matters knows that. You don't survive the Upside Down and the Mind Flayer if you're a coward. There's a difference between being brave and being foolish, and you're not a fool. Confronting five bigger jerks when you're alone would just be dumb, and that's why you didn't. They're the cowards, ganging up on you when you're alone."

Will nods slowly and seems to be thinking it over.

"You're right, thanks," he eventually says.

"No problem. Just be glad that it was me and not Jonathan."

"Why?"

"He would have landed all of them in the nurse's office and then we'd have a whole lot to answer for."

That makes Will laugh. She decides to prod on a point that she's curious about.

"Jonathan said it's good to be a freak?" She smiles.

"Yeah," Will laughs. "He said it's the best because no one normal ever accomplished anything meaningful."

She grins.

"That's true. He does have his moments, the freak." They both laugh.

She looks at the drawings Will is still holding.

"These are really good, Will. Seriously."

"Thanks," he looked embarrassed. He's almost more modest than Jonathan about his artistic pursuits, she thinks.

"Thanks again for the Barb one. It's great," she adds.

"No problem," he continues to blush modestly.

It's almost lunchtime so they get their respective lunches out and are halfway through them when a familiar face comes over.

"Hey, what's going on?" Jonathan asks, pleased but a bit puzzled to see his girlfriend having lunch with his little brother.

"Nothing, just hanging out," Nancy answers for them and gives Jonathan a peck on the cheek as he sits down.

Jonathan sits himself down next to them and takes out his lunch, an identical sandwich to the one Will is having, he has made them both, Nancy knows. She's just through quizzing him on the progress of his portfolio and flipping through the photographs he'd just developed when the sound of several hurried pairs of feet on asphalt interrupts them. They look up to see Mike, El, Dustin, Lucas and Max running up to them.

"Is it true?" Mike asks as they stop panting.

"What?"

"That you punched out Troy for picking on Will?" Dustin elaborates.

"What?" Jonathan looks at both her and Will.

"Everyone's talking about it! Becky Sullivan said it looked like he'd cried and everything!" Max adds, the boys grinning excitedly.

"Jesus, calm down guys," she tries to deflate it.

"What happened?" Jonathan demands.

"Just... some idiots ganged up on Will so I told 'em to stop, the jerkass didn't so I punched him. It's not a big deal."

"It's a huge deal!" Lucas exclaims. "This is awesome, you're awesome."

She rolls her eyes slightly bemused. They seem more impressed by her punching some teenage douche than fighting a Demogorgon with bear traps and fire.

"Guys, can you give us a minute?" Jonathan requests.

"Why?"

"Mike," she admonishes.

"Fine," he rolls his eyes and they walk away. Will starts to get up.

"Will, not you," Jonathan stops him. "Just, uh, are you okay? What happened?"

"What Nancy said. I'm fine."

"Was it the first time they went after you?"

Will squirms.

"I think it was the last time," Nancy answers for him. "Think I made myself pretty clear."

Jonathan nods but still looks with concern at Will.

"You want to talk about it?"

"Nah, we've already talked about it. I'm fine. Really."

"Okay. See you later then."

Will rejoins his friends, who will pester him for details in their own way. She makes a mental note to remember to discourage El from using her powers against Troy. Again. Mike's told her the story of the Quarry incident. It's not out of any pity for Troy, just that it's best for

El lay low. Jonathan looks at her.

"He's fine," she assures him.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Will didn't want it to be a big deal. Plus it felt kind of weird to answer 'what's going on?' with 'Nothing much, I just punched some dude for calling your brother a faggot and shoving him into a locker.'"

Jonathan's eyes darken when he hears that. He mutters something under his breath about the fucking idiots who populate this school. She nods in agreement.

"I just don't understand why he didn't want-" He starts then. She interrupts him because he knows where he's going.

"He doesn't want you to think of him as weak."

"He's not weak! He's so stro-" Jonathan is getting heated, talking about his beloved brother.

"I know, I know, I think so too, so I told him."

"Told him what?"

"That we all obviously know he's not a coward and that it isn't cowardly to need some help when you're cornered."

Jonathan looks at her for a second and seems to calm down.

"Thank you. For doing what you did. And talking with him."

"Of course. Nobody messes with a Byers boy on my watch," she says with a wink, breaking the tension.

"Do you think you'll get in trouble? For fighting," he asks.

"Hm. I haven't thought about that. Huh. I'll guess we'll see."

Jonathan nods. She can't help it, she has to ask.

"Am I a freak?"

"What? No! No of course not why would you- who said that? I will-, who was it?" He gets so insensed immediately, it's cute.

"Will said you told him that being a freak is the best because no one normal ever accomplished anything in this world. So you're now saying I won't accomplish anything?" She can't keep a straight face as his face changes from incensed to confused to panicked over his own words.

"What? No! Oh my god no you're amazing you can do anything you want! Seriously you're the most awesome person ever in the whole world you will do so much, you can do anything in the-"

"So you're saying I'm a freak?" She interrupts and he now picks up on her tone and her grin.

"Yes. Yes you are huge freak," he smiles back.

"Almost as big as you, freak," she teases back and kisses his lips. They both smile into it.

Turns out that for once sexism works out in her favor, because Troy is apparently too embarrassed by the fact that he got punched by a girl to say anything. And no one else tattles either. She also talks with El and gets the girl to reluctantly agree to not go after "that mouthbreather" with her powers. The incident has three ramifications though. The first two becomes apparent quickly: Troy and the bullies seems to leave Will and the rest alone. And Jonathan shoots Troy the deadliest of death glare every time they see him which seems to shake the younger boy.

The third one comes a bit later. It's an ordinary Thursday, and she's got another free period. She's on her way to the darkroom and Jonathan when she sees Max and El in the otherwise empty hallway, by a locker she knows doesn't belong to either of them.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

Both girls turnaround quickly but relax when they see it's just her.

"Nothing," both girls answer at the same time. Yeah right. Max is obviously hiding something behind her back and El's got the worst pokerface ever.

"Who's locker is this?"

"Nobody's."

She rolls her eyes.

"Come on. It's me. What are you up to?"

"It's Troy's locker," El admits.

"We were just going to... put something in there. To get revenge on him for picking on Will," Max adds.

"Well why didn't you say so? Alright, what's the game plan, what do you got to put in there?" She's immediately onboard of course.

Both girls look relieved and grin.

"This," Max says and shows her the stink bomb she's been hiding.

"Wow, alright. I'm down. Do you need help getting it open?" She asks and is already pulling a pin out of her hair when Max stops her.

"No no, El's got it. Duh. Just uh... you keep watch."

"Oh, right, of course. Yes, no problem."

She stands lookout while El uses her powers to break into the locker and Max gets the stink bomb in it.

When they're done they go their separate ways and she's very pleased when she goes into the darkroom. She finds Jonathan working by the counter and goes up behind him and hugs him as usual when he's like that.

"Mmm. Good day?" He asks softly.

"Very," she smiles.

23. Just yesterday and a lifetime ago

She's in the school library studying. Feels almost like she's living there as of late, ahead of college applications. She needs to maximize her chances so she's doing everything she can and the workload is kind of crazy. Jonathan is the same way. He's often with her here but right now he's in the darkroom where he spends more time than ever now trying to make his portfolio as great as can possibly be. He wants to go to NYU, to Tisch School of the Arts and pursue photography. He keeps downplaying his chances, like he can't possibly get in. Which she personally feels is bullshit. She's told him that numerous times too. Not like she's pumping him up saying it's a sure thing, but just trying to get him to realize that his dream may well become reality because he's a great photographer and a great student and who would turn that down? He keeps saying it's a big country with lots of kids wanting to do photography at NYU. She keeps telling him he's the best photographer in the world. He doesn't quite agree with her on that yet so she's made it her personal mission in life to one day get him to see that he is.

She has her clear top choice too. Columbia. Pulitzer's school. The end goal being a journalism degree, she'll combine it with political science. She doesn't want to stop peeking behind the curtain, she wants to keep digging, keep finding out stuff, keep exposing secrets the government keeps from them all. She can't stand not knowing. They've come to know a lot over the last few years but she knows it's just the tip of the iceberg. There must be so much more hiding under the surface.

Still she's got a study buddy today even with Jonathan being in the darkroom. Like most days she's joined by the most studious and knowledge-hungry girl she's ever met, who she keeps tutoring by the girl's own request.

"Mouthbreather..."

"Hm?" She looks up from her book at the sudden muttering from the girl to her left.

"Nixon was a mouthbreather," El states, looking up from the book on

US politics she was engrossed in.

She can barely contain her grin.

"You know, if you say that to my dad next time you're over at our house, I'll buy you a box of Eggos," she smiles.

"Really?"

"Yup. Throw in Reagan too and I'll make it two boxes."

"Awesome."

El smiles and returns her focus to her book. El. She's been thinking about that, just that for a while. El. Deciding now is as good a time as any to raise the issue, she gets the girl's attention again.

"Hey can I ask you something?"

"Yes?" El looks up again and puts her book down.

"Do you want to be El?"

"What do you mean?" El looks confused.

"I mean uh... what do you like to be called? I just started calling you El because that's what Mike called you. But El... Eleven... Jane... which do you prefer? We all call you different stuff. I hear Dustin say Eleven sometimes, but Hopper uses Jane."

"I don't... Mike made El up. Short for Eleven."

"Right yeah, I know, I got that. But do you like it? I mean, your mom named you Jane."

"Right," El answers, pensively. Looking to be deep in thought. "And bad people made me Eleven."

"Right..."

"But Mike made El up. Mike is good."

"Right, yes, he is. Look I'm not telling you what to do either way I've

just been thinking... I just want to make sure you know that it's you... it's your choice. Your name, your choice, what we call you. I mean if you like El that's fine, but you don't have to let us keep calling you that just because Mike came up with it. I mean, now we know your real name, not the number that the bad place assigned to you. So we can change what we call you, if you want."

"Hm..."

"You understand? I'm not saying you have to choose one over the other just, if you don't like what we call you, we should change."

"I understand. Hm... I don't like Eleven. I'm not a number."

"Right. You're not."

"I like Jane. Jane is pretty."

"I think so too."

"El is... special."

"Because Mike made it up?"

"Yes... but it's short for the number... I like him making it up. So we could use it instead of the number. But that was before I knew my real name."

"Right. If he'd meet you now, he'd call you Jane."

"Yes."

"So you like Jane and don't like Eleven. And El is special?"

"Yes."

"So what would you like me to call you?"

"... Jane. It's prettiest. I think... I think El might be special like a... nickname. Petname?"

"Right, yes. You like it when Mike uses it?"

"Yes."

"That's nice. Then I'll call you Jane. And you should tell the others what you want them to call you. It's your name."

"Yes, I will."

"Oh, speaking of Jane! I forgot, I thought of another book you might like," she remembers.

"Oh?" Jane's eyes light up.

"Yeah, hang on."

She gets up and goes hunting through the shelves, soon returning with her find.

"*Jane Eyre*?" Jane reads off the cover.

"Yes, that's the main character. But it's not just the name, I think you might like it. It's about this smart young girl who has it tough growing up but that doesn't stop her from growing into this pretty cool woman. I think you might relate," she smiles. "It was written in England in the 1800s so it's pretty old but it's still relevant."

"Cool. Thanks!"

"And as always, if there's any weird words you don't understand or anything else just write them down and we'll look them up together."

"Right," Jane answers, looking ready to devour the novel right now. She really loves reading fiction.

Life's not all about studying for college though. Today's an important day. An important date.

"So it's Jane now?" Jonathan asks in the car.

"Yep, I asked her what she preferred," she explains. Quite content to small talk on the way to where they're headed.

"Nice. I like Jane."

"I do too. Jane and Jonathan. And Joyce. And Jim. I almost feel a bit bad for Will," she jokes.

"Oh right," Jonathan chuckles. "Didn't even think of that. His middle name is Jason though."

"Nice. What's yours?" She asks. He goes quiet, looking uncomfortable for a second.

"Uh, it's Alonzo. After dad..."

"Oh... sorry," she tells him, giving his hand a squeeze.

"I hate it."

"I get that. Sorry."

"It's okay."

"Wanna know mine?"

"Yes."

"Ethel."

He immediately snickers at that revelation.

"Shut up, it's after my grandma," she lightly smacks him on the chest with the flowers in her hand. But really she's glad that her kind of embarrassing middle name at least was good for brightening the mood. She relishes it being a bright mood right now given where they're going.

"Nancy Ethel Wheeler," he states.

"Yup."

"Hey, you're NEW! Your initials, I mean," he grins.

"Yeah thanks, I got that," she chuckles.

There's a little bit of chill in the air she notes as they step out of the car. It's another crisp, clear autumn day. Jonathan opens the cemetery gates for her.

It's been two years to the day since Barb died. And about a year since she was buried. That will never not be fucked up. She clutches the flowers in one hand and Jonathan's hand in the other and walks up to the grave.

"Do you want priva-" Jonathan begins to ask the question he asks her every time they're here, because sometimes her answers wary. Most often not though.

"No," she cuts him off.

"Okay," he says quietly.

She lets go of his hand and crouches down to set down the flowers.

"She always hated hers, but I always thought it was pretty," she softly tells him.

"What?"

"Her middle name. Lucille. I always kind of liked it," she explains, gesturing at the tombstone.

"It's beautiful," he says.

"Yeah," she sighs and takes a deep breath. "See Barb, two against one. Lucille is pretty. Actually four against one because I've got your mom and dad on my side too of course. Anyway. Hey," she begins, looking at the tombstone. It still looks brand-new. "Sorry I haven't been around the last few weeks. But senior year is crazy, like I said last time. You would've crushed it though. You would've gotten into Stanford like you wanted, no doubt. I know it," she momentarily stops to collect herself and blink away some tears as the thought of Barb never going there hits her. "It's been a while since I've seen them, by the way. Your parents, I mean. Still go to dinner with them sometimes. I think they're holding up pretty good. They really are incredibly sweet, you know. Your mom really likes Jonathan. I like that. Because you would've too, like I said. Not saying you're like

your mom just... you're not totally dissimilar, okay? And it's not bad in any case. Anyway... it's been two years now" she has to stop herself again and wipe away tears. "It's crazy but it's been two years. It doesn't feel like it. Somehow feels like just yesterday and a lifetime ago at the same time. I think about you every day. I've got Will's drawing of you on my nightstand, the one I told you about. He really captured you well," she pauses again. Thinks. Is there anything more she wants to say right now. "I miss you. I love you."

She slowly gets up, wipes away more tears and steps away from the grave. Jonathan pulls her into a hug. She stays in his arms for a while. When she's ready they walk away. She tucks herself into his side and he presses a kiss to her temple. He doesn't say anything because he doesn't have to. It's enough that he's there.

24. In motion

This is the day. April 1. And this is the time. By her estimate she might even be running a minute late, because their mailman is very punctual. Which she appreciates. She bolts down the stairs. Mike happens to accidentally get in her way at the bottom so she tackles him to the side. He's shot up like a weed over the past year but has only gone from a scrawny boy to gangly scrawny boy so she sends him flying into the wall. "Hey!" he calls out. She throws a quick "Sorry!" over her shoulder and slams the front door wide open. She's right on time, Barry the mailman is just in the process of putting mail in their postbox. And she can see he's got a lot of envelopes in his hand. Some thick, some thin. She darts over. He looks up.

"Ah," the jovial man shoots her a grin. "Big day," he says and hands over the envelopes to her directly.

"Yup," she answers while counting the number of envelopes.

"Good luck to you," Barry continues.

"Thanks."

Barry continues on his route and she heads back inside with the envelopes and her mother's Cosmopolitan tucked under her arm. Mike is still stood in the hall, rubbing his upper arm.

"Be more of a hazard to live with," he whines.

"Shut up Mike, with any luck you'll soon be rid of me," she throws back, waving the envelopes with different university logos in the corners at him.

"One can only hope," he mutters and follows her into the kitchen.

Their father is sat at the table hiding behind his newspaper as usual, Holly in her high chair and their mother is finishing breakfast by the stove. The latter looks up when she hears them enter.

"They arrived," she wields the envelopes in the air again. "Oh, and here," she hands over the Cosmo to her mother, who steps away from

the stove.

"Oh, thank you. And honey remember, whichever way this goes remember that we are so proud-" her mother starts. Her father puts down his paper.

"Yeah yeah, whatever, I know, thanks," she hurriedly answers. She's very much a rip the band-aid off fast kind of girl, desperate to find out her future. She puts the envelopes down on the table and opens the first one.

"I got into IU," she quickly reads off. That was her safety school. She hurries onto the next in the pile while her mother coos about how great that is. "And Brown," she continues. Her mother has quieted now. "Harvard... no," she continues. "Yale waitlisted me." Screw them, she didn't want to go there anyway. Stuffy snobs. Her mother mumbles something about that that's okay. "Northwestern... waitlist," she continues. "NYU... yes. Wesleyan... waitlist." She takes a deep breath. There's only envelope left now, and it's the big one. Her first choice, Columbia.

"Yes!"

She throws her arms straight up into the air in celebration. Mike raises his hands for a highfive or something but without thinking she first gives him another push, she just has so much pent up energy. He stumbles. Then she pulls him into a hug. This is awesome! She hugs her mother next who's almost as overjoyed as she herself is. Her father tells her "Congratulations" and nods, she can almost, *almost* make out some emotion on his face even. Holly reaches up to be hugged too because her mother and brother got one each so she wants one too even though she doesn't know what's going on. She obliges the request of course and plants a big kiss on top of her sister's head too, who squeals in return.

"Where are you going? You haven't had breakfast yet!" Her mother calls after her when she rushes out into the hall again.

"Jonathan!" She calls back as she runs out the front door.

She stops in her tracks as she realizes running the whole way there

isn't the most efficient solution. She turns around and quickly takes Mike's bike that's leaning against the wall.

"No no no! Not my bike!" Mike runs out after her but he's too late.

"You'll get it back!" She calls back over her shoulder as she pedals away.

Their front door opens on its own after she's knocked. Thanks, Jane. She steps inside. They're all stood in the living room, surrounding Jonathan. He's blushing and smiling and looks up at her when she steps in. Joyce is next to him, looking at him with such love, pride and happiness in her eyes she doesn't even have to ask. She knows.

"You got in!" She shouts and points at him.

"Yep," he smiles wider and nods as she darts over to him. "And you did too," he adds just before she throws her arms around his neck and hugs him tight.

His arms wrap around her and he holds her close, he giggles with her, both so giddy.

"I'm so proud of you," she tells him. "I told you didn't I? I told you a thousand times you'd get in! I knew it! Did you get the-"

"Scholarship. Yeah..." he fills in, blushing even more. She kisses him on the mouth right in front of everyone.

"You're a genius!" She gushes. "I told you!"

"You're one to talk, Ms. Columbia," he chuckles.

"Who cares, you got the scholarship! I told you you're the best photographer in the world!"

"A scholarship doesn't mean that-" he tries.

"I say it does!" She protests.

"Oh, congratulations sweetheart," Joyce says and hugs her when she's

released her grip around Jonathan. Will, Jane and Hopper congratulates her too.

"Thank you," she smiles and returns the hug.

She has breakfast with the Byers, or Byers-Hopper (unofficially) now, and they all excitedly talk about college and New York. She's so happy and so proud. There's a way out of Hawkins, there's a way to a future. It feels like they're in motion. They can do anything. Joyce looks immensely proud and talks at length about how Jonathan will be the first one in her whole family to go to college. Jane and Will are very excited about the prospect of New York. Hopper even gets to reminiscing about the place he used to live. If not for Jonathan's levelheadedness they would've forgotten about school completely, but after his gentle reminder they pile into his car, she and Jonathan in the front, Will and Jane in the back. They stop and pick up Mike on the way. He whines about her bike-thievery but Jane overrules him with more questions and talk about New York. At school the halls are buzzing with college admission talk of course. Some come up to them and ask, and she tells them the good news. Makes sure to emphasize that Jonathan got a scholarship, she's so proud and some idiots slightly surprised looks makes it even sweeter. Screw Hawkins for not recognizing what a talented, smart, awesome person Jonathan is, at least NYU sees it.

At lunch the whole Party descends on them where they're sitting by their own table in the corner of the cafeteria talking about the details of his scholarship and about Columbia and all the rest.

"When you move to New York will you live together?" Jane asks.

"When can we come and visit?" Will asks.

"Congrats by the way," Lucas says.

"Yeah, cool," Max fills in.

"Yes, congratulations, especially you Nancy. You've always been my favorite," Dustin adds with a flourish.

"Who gets your room?" Jane comes in with another question for

Jonathan before they've had a chance to answer any.

"Okay first of all thank you," she starts, looking from Dustin to Lucas to Max. "Second of all yeah, I think so," she looks to Jonathan for confirmation, he nods his head, in reference to Jane's first question.

"Second of all it's months away before we even start," Jonathan continues, looking at Will. "And third of all, you two will have to fight it out I guess," he smiles at Jane.

The kids keep talking about it, the prospect of New York and college and getting out of here. She notices Jonathan gradually quiets but chalks it up to him just tiring a bit of the others going on and on about it, or just being a bit overwhelmed. She takes his hand other the table. His smile doesn't quite reach his eyes when Dustin for the seventh time exclaims that it's "so cool to see two people finally getting out of Hawkins."

Jonathan's got work later so after school he just takes her and the others home before he gets ready and heads out again. She fills out her return letter to Columbia and goes to mail it right away. In the evening her mother has prepared a veritable feast because "we have to celebrate".

The next day after school they're hanging out in his room, like they do a lot. He's been quiet throughout the day but she's not pressed on it. He just gets that way sometimes, it's not like it's a big deal. He's a quiet person, though usually talkative with her. But it feels slightly odd now, with the admission letters staking out their future more clearly, she'd think he'd be more... upbeat, happy. His dream of New York is reality now. But he's gradually quieted down after the initial giddiness yesterday morning. Still, she doesn't want to be overbearing. He'll probably snap out of it soon enough.

But now she spots something on his desk which catches her attention.

"Hey, have you mailed your response letter yet?" She asks, nodding to the stack of NYU papers.

"Hm?" He looks up from where he's sitting next to her on the bed,

studying photographs he brought home today. "Oh. No, not yet."

"Okay. Just... I mean it's good to do it ASAP..." she prods.

"Mm," is the only response she gets, he looks down at his photos again.

"I mean, why wait?" She tries again.

No response.

"Jonathan?" She knows the photos aren't *that* interesting now, he's already gone over them at least five times today. And she knows he heard her. And he *always* answers her. Something's up.

He mumbles a reply she can't hear.

"What's that?"

"I said it's good to wait to answer when you don't know the answer."

That shocks her enough to make her stand up for some reason. She looks at him in disbelief.

"What? What do you mean you don't know the answer?"

"That. I... I don't know," he says quietly, averting his gaze.

"Jonathan this is... this is NYU! How can there even be any doubt?" She's incredulous. "Don't you want to go there?! You said you wanted to! Your mom said you've wanted to since you were six! You told me you wanted to so many times! Suddenly you don't want to anymore?!" Her voice gets a little louder than she likes for it to be. She just can't fathom this.

"Yes!" He snaps a little back at her. "Yes I want to!" He throws back at her, standing up from the bed as well.

"Well then what's stopping you?!"

"It's complicated!"

"What? You want to go to NYU and NYU wants you! How is it

complicated?!"

"Because of fucking *life*!" He counters with. He swore, he almost never swears. "I can't just..."

"Can't just what?"

"Leave! Will, mom... Jane! With everything that's happened! Everything that can happen! Fucking monsters have attacked us two times, right here. Will almost... twice! And there's bad men and the government is evil! I can't just... what if something happens? And I'm not here to protect them?!"

That shuts her up for a second. She goes quiet, thinking, processing that. Trying to formulate her thoughts into words. She's suddenly aware of the fact that the whole house is quiet now, they didn't close his bedroom door and could hear the TV on in the living room just before.

"You can't... you can't..." she tries to start, but loses her thread, her mind is spinning.

"I can't what, Nancy? Can't protect them?!" He interrupts.

"Yes you fucking can but that's not the point! You can protect them, me, all of us, goddamn everyone! But you have to think about yourself too sometime! For once in your damn life can you put yourself anywhere else but last?!"

It's weirdly infuriating, how he is sometimes. She never dreamt she'd fall for a guy who's worst quality is that *he's too damn selfless*. She didn't even know that was a thing. She's so worked up she has to quickly wipe away some tears. She can hear soft footsteps in the hallway. But he's quiet, so she presses on.

"A lot of shit has gone down, a lot of stuff has happened that shouldn't ever have happened if the world was just slightly fair! Of course you want to protect them, I do too, if anything or anyone would come after Mike, or Will or Jane I'd shoot it on sight! But we have to eventually move on! Do you want to commit the rest of your life to hover above them like a guardian? Do you think that's what

they'd want you to do?!"

"I don't hover!"

"You're right, you don't hover, you just want to sacrifice all your dreams so you'll be close by on the off-chance that something happens again."

"I just... if something happens and we're not here, then what? We were almost too late last time! Don't you see? I can't stop thinking about that!"

"You think I don't think about that too?! You think I'm just looking to get out of here and never look back or what?! Of course I fucking think about that too, it scares the crap out of me too, the thought of shit going down when we're not here! But I'm trying to... to..."

"To what, Nancy?!"

"To move on! And help you move on! I wasted a fucking *year* of my life living in the past, living in a damn pit of grief and guilt and fear! That place, that thing took Barb, took her whole life *and* a year of mine because I couldn't move on from it. *You* helped me move on! And I promised myself I'd never retreat again, I'd never be stuck in the past again, I told you that! You're the best thing that's ever happened to me! It's scary as hell but we have to move on Jonathan, we have to move forward! If we don't we're stuck in the past and lets that place control our lives! If we do that then it's won! We have to forward, I'm not having it control my life and definitely not yours!"

She can't make him out now, he's all blurry. She realizes it's because more tears have welled up in her eyes. Before she can wipe them away though he's right there and suddenly she's wrapped up in his big embrace. He holds her close to his chest and she automatically wraps her arms around him. Turning her face into his chest she lets the tears fall.

"Sorry," he whispers.

"She's right. I don't want you to put your life on hold, honey," Joyce's voice sounds from the doorway. She takes half a step back from

Jonathan and looks to see Joyce, Will and Jane by the door, Hopper behind them. "We can't let what happened dictate our lives. If we let it do that, we lose," Joyce continues. "All I want is for you all to have the lives you want, the lives you deserve."

Jonathan looks at his mother for a long second, blinking away tears of his own.

"Jonathan, you do everything for me," Will steps forward. "Literally everything. No one could ask for more than what you've done for me. But you have to live your own life too. Yeah there's been a lot of stuff that's been... bad. But I'm fine now. I'm good. Remember what you told me in the car, before trick-or-treating that fall, just before it all... went down?"

Jonathan nods.

"You promised you'd stop treating me like I was different, like everyone else did. You promised. If you give up on your dreams because of me, to look after me you break that promise. I love you but you have to live your own life. That's what I want."

Slowly Jonathan nods again, looking at his little brother.

"We all want you to go, Jonathan. But I don't want you to go because we want it. I want you to go because *you* want to," she butts in again.

"I... I want to. I hear you, Nance. I hear what you're saying. I know. I know we have to but it's... it's hard. I can't help but worry..."

"I know, me too... But we have to try... And at least it's been calm now, for a long while... we have to try..."

Jane steps forward.

"It is calm. My senses... I've practiced. I'm getting... stronger," she points to her temple. "I feel things... I sense... and it's good. No danger. For long time."

"It's looking calm kid," Hopper nods. "What do you think I do every day at work? The most serious incidents I've had to deal with over the past year has all involved you two, when you had your little

fisticuffs with that punk kid outside the movie theatre, and when you fought that psycho Hargrove kid. That's it. Rest of the time I just go around checking that we're good on the whole evil parallel dimension front. And we are. No signs, no mysterious happenings. At all. If I'd see anything amiss, I would tell you guys."

"You should go," Jane says with conviction. "Nancy told me about the world and exploring. Big world. I grew up in here, she showed," Jane holds her hand up and makes a tiny circle with her index finger and thumb. A visual she thought of giving the girl early on in their tutoring sessions, as Jane had infinite questions about the sheer largeness of the world, of knowledge. "Tiny world. Nothing to explore. Now I'm here," she makes the circle a little bit bigger. "Little bigger world. Better world. More to explore. But really world is this big," she continues and does away with circle shape, waving her hands in thin air to make her point. "So much more than this. Lots to explore. You should."

She nods and puts a hand on the girl's shoulder. Jonathan nods too.

"And," Jane continues. "Bigger world... bigger reach. I've practiced, like I said. I'm stronger. And have bigger reach. If something would happen... if I'd sense something before it... I'd let you know. I'd tell you right away. And I'd protect. Promise. Trust me."

Jonathan nods again. Looks from Jane to Will to Joyce to Hopper to her.

"I trust you," he says softly. Simple but monumental words. She thinks back to when he first told her those words, at Murray's long ago. She's never heard him say them to everyone like this before.

She takes his hands in hers. Runs her thumb over the scar across his left palm. She feels him to do the same to her scar. He meets her eye.

"Do you want to go?"

"Yes."

"*Will* you go?"

"... yes."

She throws her arms around him again. He wraps his around her. Soon she feels Jane, Will and Joyce join them.

"Sorry about the yelling," she mumbles.

"It's alright," Joyce answers.

"I'm sorry too," Jonathan says. "Anyone up for going to the post office?"

25. The best place

The end of the school year really flies by. After college admissions came in she feels it's increasingly hard to focus on school, thoughts of the future, a future in New York, together with Jonathan, take over more and more instead. But she does manage to keep her work up throughout the last few months of high school, she wouldn't be nerdy Nancy with the 3.99999 GPA as Steve had once incorrectly states (it's really 4.0, thank you very much). Jonathan does too of course, his work ethic and discipline is really something. Turns out they graduate as number one and two in terms of GPA in their year and she's valedictorian. So it's fair to say they kicked high school's butt, she thinks. Summer is odd, their bodies are in Hawkins but their heads in the clouds or New York, depending on how you look at it. Yes they work and have fun together in the present too, but at night they lay awake together dreaming up endless plans for the future. It makes her feel ridiculously giddy.

Their plan is to live together in New York, of course. Sharing a dorm room with some stranger doesn't sound nearly as fun as sharing a cramped apartment with Jonathan. Hawkins doesn't offer much, but it does offer a surprisingly well-stocked public library where they make a habit of going to scour the New York Times apartment listings daily. They got mixed reactions from their families when they told them of their plan. Joyce thought it sounded great, fantastic and amazing. Her mother thought it sounded lovely, her father thought "Hm. Hm hm" apparently. Mike said "duh", Will said it's cool and El said it's bitchin'. Hopper though, somewhat mysteriously said "I see. Let me get back to you." It had proven tough to get hold of an apartment. They're now entering August but still no leads on one. Until yesterday when Hopper came into the Byers kitchen where they were making dinner (or rather Jonathan was making it while she sat on the countertop and told him how pretty he is) with an address, a name and a phone number. He'd called around to old friends from New York and one of them had a niece who was looking to sublet her apartment for at least a year as she was going to study abroad. They really didn't expect that effort from Hopper but damn it was really appreciated, as they made sure to let him know. She called the number immediately and got on well with the girl, who sounded

eager to get the subletting handled quickly so she seemed to really appreciate her barely contained eagerness to get it. They got a verbal agreement, after some more vouching from Hopper and Hopper's friend, and they're starting the ten hour drive out there tomorrow to see the place and finalize the deal.

The apartment is indeed cramped, small and a fifth floor walk up in a slightly dingy Brooklyn building. But it's perfect. They can afford it and both fit in it, what more do they need? Plus the kitchen is actually pretty nice and living room cozy. She knows her subway commute to Columbia will take pretty long (his to Tisch will be a bit shorter) but she'll make do. They don't have a lot of time to spend in the city this time but they do indulge themselves in a quick tour of Manhattan, just to get a peek of their respective colleges they'll soon be at. The city is huge. She wants something different than Hawkins and this certainly is it. She's sure they look like giddy midwest teens in the big city for the first time as they make their way around Manhattan's streets, pointing out cool stuff to each other left and right constantly, but hey, that's what they are after all. She demands Jonathan's camera and takes his photo in front of Tisch and he poses more happily than ever for the few photos she's managed to get of him with this camera. He of course then takes her photo on the steps of the Low Memorial Library when they've continued up to find Columbia's campus.

They find a cheap motel near the freeway to spend the night in before heading back home in the morning. Sleep? Nope, they're way too excited for that, talking into the night about everything they saw today, everything they want to explore when they move out here in a few weeks. And then she can't help but reminisce...

"Remember the last time we got a motel room together?"

"Yeah," he smirks. They're cuddled together, her head resting in the crook of his neck. He takes the hand she had wrapped around him in both of his, turning the palm up. "Yep, it's definitely bigger," he nods his head looking at her scar.

"It is indeed," she smiles, turning the palm of his left hand towards them to look at his scar.

"You know, I'm such an idiot I didn't even realize until later you were flirting with me that night," he then says.

"Hey I was not flirting!" She protests.

"Oh really?"

"Well... okay I was flirting a little but only because you started it!"

"What? I didn't start it, I don't even know how to flirt!"

"Well you were being charming! And you hesitated when she asked if we wanted a single or double!"

"I did not hesitate!"

"Did too!"

"Hey maybe a little but just because I was thinking of the cost, you know we could have saved money by getting a single room."

"Right, sure."

"Honest! But I wanted to leave up to you that's why I didn't answer her first, it was your decision."

"Mmhm. Kind of wish I had chosen differently. I was being dumb, would've been nice to have shared a bed then."

"Well I would have given you the bed and slept on the floor."

"And I would've asked you to come up..."

"You would have?"

"Mmhm. I had a half a mind getting out of mine and crawling into your bed that night when you were being cute."

"When was I cute?"

"Always? But if we're talking that night specifically, all the way up until you said I didn't wait long enough."

"Mm. Yeah that was stupid."

"Well I was being stupid too, so."

"Hm."

"By the way you do know how to flirt, liar," she grins.

"What? I don't know! I don't even know when people flirt with me. I didn't get that you were flirting with me until after."

"Until after we had sex in a stranger's bunker?"

"I mean, yeah."

"Okay so if you don't flirt then what do you call that look?"

"What? Which look?"

"The look you give me! You know."

"I really don't."

"That look you give me all the time, everywhere like even in class! You know, when you look over at me and then you look down all bashfully and do your shy smile and then look back up."

"That's not flirting!"

"It's totally flirty, it gets me every time!"

"Gets you?"

"... like, you know. Gets me! I can't well think of other stuff when you give me that look, can I? Once you gave me it in the middle of English just when I had answered a question and it distracted me so when Mrs. Carmichael asked me a follow up I totally flubbed my answer!"

"Oh... I didn't realize."

"The effect you have on me?" She smirks and waggles her eyebrows at him.

"Clearly," he grins. "But seriously I didn't even realize that's a... look. I don't do it on purpose!"

"But you do it all the time!"

"Well, yeah. But it's not a look, I'm just... thinking."

"Thinking what?"

"Of you... it's just... sometimes I can't believe that there's this super smart, brave, strong, kind, beautiful, amazing girl just, out there in the world just... how you are all that... and that you somehow want to be with me I just, can't believe my luck."

He looked to be on his way to say more, but she interrupts him with a kiss, cupping his face with her hands. A warm, fuzzy feeling grew inside of her at his words, how honestly he said them, and it made her cheeks flush.

"Okay, now tell me that wasn't flirting," she smirks at him.

"It wasn't! You asked so I-"

She silences him with another kiss, smiling into it.

"I know, I know it wasn't a line. But still, makes a girl weak in the knees and her heart skip a beat, you know," she smiles. He's smiling wide back at her, staring up at her with a gaze filled with so much love. "And of course I want to be with you. If all those things about me are true then we're a good match because I know them all to be true about you."

"Well they are. No lies," he gestures between them.

"No bullshit," she nods before kissing him again.

Once they're outside the city limits the next morning she can't help but look back at the skyscrapers slowly shrinking in the distance.

"I can't wait to go back here and live in sin with you," she smiles at him.

"Me either," he chuckles. "What's the weirdest part, me or the sin?" He continues, grinning.

"Hm, definitely the sin," she muses. "Living with you feels quite natural after all," she smiles. She can count on one hand the number of times they've slept apart this year.

"Definitely," he nods. "I mean, we could rectify the living in sin part," he then throws out.

"Oh yeah, that should definitely calm my dad down about that part," she smiles. "Head for Vegas, Thumper!" She jokes.

"Hey I might take you up on that," he grins.

"And I'd probably be cool with it," she grins back.

They laugh and drop the subject, talking instead about Manhattan, Brooklyn, how to decorate the apartment and everything else. But it keeps tumbling around in the back of her head as they follow I-70 back home to Indiana.

"Hey were you serious before?" She asks in the afternoon as they're halfway through Ohio.

"When?"

"About not living in sin."

He looks at her.

"I mean, I wasn't serious about Vegas but I mean... yeah."

"Oh."

That's interesting. She's thought about it more and more, kind of all the way since Pennsylvania. And the more she's thought about it, marrying Jonathan, the more appealing it's sounded. The thought doesn't scare her. Quite the opposite. She loves him more than anything. She'd do anything for him. She'd march into another dimension and set fire to a hundred Demogorgons for his sake, if it ever would be needed. She thinks back over the past few years. She's

experienced the lowest of lows of life, wallowing in that pit of grief and guilt from the fall of 1983 to Halloween 1984. But since then she's sure she's experienced the highest of highs that life has to offer as well. Yes, she's 18. Yes, she haven't even left Hawkins for real yet. Yes, there's so much in life she still wants to explore and experience. But seriously, she highly doubts anything will ever feel better than being with him. Doing anything with him. But all that she wants to experience, everything in the world she wants to see... she's sure it will all be even better to experience with him by her side. She wants him by her side forever. So why not make it official already?

She looks up at him. He looks slightly panicked and she realizes "Oh" and then falling silent, deep into thought, wasn't maybe the most calming answer for him given the topic.

"Shit, sorry... shit... wait, hang on just let me..."

He was just being honest, he didn't mean to freak her out or put pressure on her. He'll never pressure her. Or at least not intentionally, because he now realizes admitting that yeah he could totally marry Nancy right here right now is probably pressurizing as hell. Her quiet "Oh" followed by silence tells him all. Shit. He needs to explain this, needs to explain that... yes, he loves her more than anything and wants to be with her forever but that they absolutely don't have to get married or anything of the sort, especially not right now. He shouldn't have said it like that. Yes he could marry her this second but that doesn't mean they have to, there's no real reason for them to get hitched already. Apart from the fact that he's 100 % sure he'll love her and want to be with her forever so in that way they might as well already, but.

Luckily a sign points to a service station at the next exit. He quickly takes it, this isn't a talk to have while he's also focused on driving.

"Sorry," he says, turning towards her as he's put the car in park.

"What for?" She asks, big beautiful blue eyes looking at him intently, her kind smile playing faintly over her lips. Maybe he didn't freak her out after all.

"Just... I didn't mean to put pressure on you or anything. Just being honest. I was kind of serious. Because... I love you so much, more than anything. I love you and I just want to be with you. Always, forever. I know I'll love you forever, I'm sure of that, and as long as you want me, I want to be with you. You're going to go on and do great, amazing things in life. You're unstoppable. The best in the world. You're going to do great things, I'm sure. And if you'll still want me, I'll always be there to support you and help you in any way you need, just like how you support me. I'm sure of all of this already so that's why I think that... if you'd want to, of course, I could marry you this second. Since I'm sure of all this already. But I didn't mean to put pressure on you, I mean there's no real reason for us to get hitched right now it was just a thought that... I wouldn't be opposed to the idea. But I'm not expecting anything of-

"I wouldn't be opposed either, Jonathan."

Her smile lights up the car, the world.

"Oh."

"I love *you* more than anything. I've been, we've both been, through some of life's most horrible things. I think I was at rock bottom at one point. But when I'm with you... listen, there's so much I want to do in life but most of all I want to do it with you, everything with you. I've been at the bottom but I think being with you... I can't imagine anything else in life can top that. Being with you, feeling... like I do, for you. These feelings I want forever... I *know* they'll last forever. So I want to be with you forever. I'm sure of that. And you know me. When I'm sure of something..."

He kisses her. He just has to kiss her, when she speaks like that, says all that. He can feel her smile against his lips.

"So ask me," she says when they break apart.

"Oh. Will you marry me?" His heart beats out of his chest even though he knows the answer.

"Yes."

They drive to Indiana holding hands and giggling like giddy children.

"The courthouse will probably be closed when we get home," she says as they cross the state line.

"Oh. You wanted to go right away?"

"I mean, yeah... why wait? I'm like you... I could marry you right this second, so..." she smiles.

His beaming smile is everything.

"But I mean we don't have to-"

"No, no, I meant it. I really meant it. It's like you said, why wait?"

"Right! Plus I don't know how it works. I mean maybe there's a waiting period after you apply for the marriage license? So might as well go get it as soon as possible."

"Right."

"You don't want a big wedding anyway, right?"

"God no!" The speed of his answer makes her laugh. "Do you?"

"Very much not. My mom would want it, she'd go completely overboard with it and turn it into something huge. I love her, but I don't want that. This is huge enough for me," she raises their interlocked hands to her lips and presses a kiss to his knuckles.

"For me too."

"I feel bad but... we can't tell my family beforehand... she's definitely going to be upset about it but I just... I can't. This is supposed to be about us, it should be how we want it, right?"

"Yeah."

"And I just want you. I don't want a big huge white dress, I want something I'm comfortable in. I don't want a huge crowd of relatives I barely know there staring at us. What do you want?"

"I just want you to be happy," he smiles. "So, no big deal, no crowds, no families. Just us."

"I mean, your family... maybe... I mean, I don't want to say no to them! I just know I can't deal with my mom for this. Or dad, for that matter. They won't understand. Or approve of a wedding that's not in a big church with a hundred people there. But your family..."

"No families," he shakes his head, still smiling. "I love them and they love you but we don't need anyone there but ourselves. They'll understand. We can't tell my family but not yours."

"Okay... but you're sure? If you want them there... I don't want to say... it's a hundred percent your decision."

"No families. Hey, don't people split up weddings between ceremony and reception anyway? So it'll be just us for the eloping... ceremony part. Then when we tell them after that's our reception of sorts."

"I say we go to your house for the first reception then!"

It's evening when they're back in Hawkins so they go straight to Jonathan's house to turn in for the night, after getting bombarded with questions from Joyce, Will, Jane and Hopper about New York. When they've sufficiently satisfied them all with answers they can finally go to Jonathan's room and crawl under the sheets.

"Hey. Still wanna do it?" She asks him the next morning, squinting at him through the morning sun streaming through the window.

"Of course. You?"

"Yeah! Was just checking," she smiles.

They happily answer more questions about New York over breakfast. Internally she's trying to come up with suitable lie for what their plans for the day are, but it turns out it's not needed as Joyce and Hopper both has to hurry off to run some errand and Will and Jane scurry off to meet up with Mike and the others.

"Okay so... let's do this!" She exclaims when they're finally alone. "I

really hope there's no waiting period."

"Same. But uh, do we need to bring anything, do you think?"

"I don't know. I guess ID at least."

"Yeah."

"We need to stop by my house too. It may just be the courthouse but I still wanna look nice."

"You look amazing."

"I'm wearing your old t-shirt and you're old sweatpants and I haven't showered."

"My point still stands."

She blushes and shakes her head.

"But yes, of course. I'm gonna jump in the shower now."

When he comes out of the shower she restrains herself from getting sidetracked by the treat that is shirtless Jonathan, to focus on the task at hand.

"I have some requests- I mean, suggestions for what you should wear," she hurries to correct herself, blushing as he grins at her wording. "I mean, if you want."

"And they are?" He smiles as he steps closer to her.

"Well, this shirt brings out your eyes. You have nice eyes," she holds up her favorite shirt of his. And... I know you're not a big fan of formal stuff but I like Formal Jonathan, he's really dashing," she blushes, pointing at his black pants and the only blazer he owns which she laid out on the bed. He's got a huge smile plastered over his face. He cups both her cheeks and gives her a sweet kiss.

"Well if you like Formal Jonathan I guess he can't be half-bad," he smirks.

"He's the best," she mumbles. "You can pick what I wear!"

"Nance you look amazing in anything-" he begins answering her while he starts to get dressed.

"So pick something. Something you like me in."

"I like you in everything-"

"I know. Thank you. I like you in everything to. And nothing," she slyly adds. "But come on, pick something you really like me in."

"Uh..." he thinks while buttoning his shirt. "Um... maybe uh... that white dress... you know, with the pattern. That you wear the belt with... you look... mesmerizing in that."

She blushes at his choice of words. He tells her regularly that she's pretty, beautiful, gorgeous, hot, sexy and now she's mesmerizing too. And Jonathan is someone who says what he's really thinking.

"Sure, I love that dress," she smiles. It's one of her favorites to wear in the summer.

He beams back at her.

"One last thing though," she says and holds up a tie. "Please."

"Anything for you," he grins.

"You look nice in a tie," she tells him while she's tying it around his neck. Adjusting the knot slightly she's then satisfied and takes in the full look of Jonathan. Her Jonathan. "Plus, it has the added benefit that you now come with a handle," she smirks and pulls him in by the tie for a kiss. "It's practical."

"Very."

She expected at least her mother to be home but they find the house to be empty. Works well for them, they don't have to answer questions about why they're dressed up. On the way to the courthouse they stop by the pawn shop downtown to get rings. Simple, elegant and cheap he buys hers and she buys his. She puts

both rings into her purse for now.

"Hello, we'd like to get married."

She smiles at the old woman behind the counter. Who wearily looks up. Looks at her, looks at Jonathan.

"Mmhm. Are you both over the age of 18?" She asks in a dry voice that really conveys that she only has a very passing interest in the two of them and their business at the courthouse.

"Yes."

"Mmhm. I'm going to need to see some ID."

They hand over their drivers licenses.

"Mmhm. Are either of you under the influence of drugs or alcohol?"

"N-no."

The lady barely glances up at them.

"Mmhm. I'll take your word for it. Are you more closely related to each other than second cousins?"

"No!"

"Mmhmm. Fill this out."

The lady smacks down a document on the counter. She grabs a fountain pen and fills in her info before handing the pen over to Jonathan.

"That'll be 18 dollars," the lady says when Jonathan is finished, and holds out her hand.

"Oh! Uh..." Jonathan rifles through his pockets by reflex.

"Wait, I think I've got it," she mumbles, going digging in her purse.

"We should split it-"

"No come on, it evens out. Plus you paid for gas yesterday and day before," she reasons. She's come up with ten dollar bill and a fiver.

"Uh, would it be possible to haggle?" She tries. The look on the lady's face tells her the answer. Luckily Jonathan has come up with a dollar bill and eight random quarters from his pants pockets. They dump it all on the counter.

"Mmhm," the lady mutters again, raking in the money. "You wanna get hitched right now I take it?"

"Yes," she answers, ignoring the woman's not at all subtle glance over her abdomen. No lady, this isn't a shotgun wedding.

"One moment."

One moment turns out be a really long. They wait at the counter for what may be only five minutes but feels like ten times that. Finally the lady returns.

"A judge will see you in a half-hour. You can wait there," she tells them in her dry voice, pointing to some chairs by the wall.

She makes a noise of disappointment but doesn't protest as the lady just raises an eyebrow at her and she realizes it's useless. Jonathan leads her over to the chairs and sits down. She sits down in his lap, ignoring the looks from the lady. He holds her close and steady while she wraps her arms around his shoulders. The way he smiles at her extinguishes her slight annoyance with having to wait another thirty minutes before she can marry the hell out of Jonathan Byers.

"Wish we could afford a honeymoon," he grins.

"Hey who says we can't?" She smiles.

"My bank account, your bank account and our plan to save money for New York," he smirks.

"Well I'm not saying Paris or Hawaii. But I do know a cheap and cozy motel in Illinois. I hear they have both single and double rooms..."

"I love your ideas."

"I love you."

The way he's beaming at her, she just has to kiss him again.

"I know what we can do while we wait," she then says, having another idea. "We can take our vows now. I don't think the judge needs to hear them."

"True. Who goes first?"

"I can start," she says, trying to think of just where to begin. Thing is it's almost like they already took them yesterday. But she'll never get tired of telling him how much she loves him, so. "Jonathan I love you, more than anything and I vow to always do everything I can to make you happy. I want you to realize all your dreams because I know you can do whatever you set your mind to, and I vow to do everything I can to help you with this. I vow to always protect you, from whatever danger, from whatever dimension... I vow to protect your family too. I love you and I love your family. I know it's complicated with the surname, because of your dad but I'm really excited to be a Byers, because it's not just his name. It's your name and it's Will's name and it's Joyce's name. You've made it your own, I think it's a nice name and to me it stands for these three incredible, strong, brave, sweet people who I love and so I can't wait to be part of that. I'm going to carry the name with pride, I want everyone to know that I'm a Byers because it lets them know that I'm with you, forever and I couldn't be more proud to be anything other than that. I love you."

He looks slightly taken aback by her words. Then he kisses her. He then begins in a low voice:

"Nancy I love you. And mom does and Will does, you're already a part of the family. But that means the world to me. If you're proud to carry my name... you can't even imagine how proud I am to be with you. And you being a Byers makes being a Byers something way better than it's been before. I vow to protect you too. I will do anything, literally anything, to keep you safe. And to keep you happy. I vow that too, you're the best in the world, you're going to do great things in life. You could probably do it all on your own."

She vehemently shakes her head in disagreement with that.

"- but anything I can do to help, I will. I vow that I will challenge you when you need it, just like you challenge me-"

"Me too, I promise that too! Vow. Sorry, continue," she hastily interrupts. He smiles and continues.

"And we've already promised each other 'no bullshit' but I'm taking that as a vow too. No bullshit. Just you and me, honest and together. I think we can do anything."

"Me too, I vow that too."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

"The judge will see you now," the dreary voice eventually calls over to them from the counter. They immediately get up. "Take this with you, go down that corridor, third door on the right," she hands over their marriage license and lazily points. "And congratulations on your very special day," she finishes with absolutely no inflection in her voice whatsoever.

"Thank you!"

Considering the clerk's mood she's not sure what to expect of the judge. He turns out to be quite the opposite of the poor lady working the counter. After tentatively knocking on the door they step in to an office where they're greeted by a jovial old man in a black robe who's grey hair looks to be on the verge of turning white.

"Ah! You two looking to get married?"

"Yes?"

"Well you came to the right place," he smiles wide. "Do you have the documents with you?"

"Yes," she hands over the papers they filled out.

"Well this all looks to be in order. And you two look happy!"

"We are," Jonathan answers.

"Great! This is my favorite part of my job. It's much more fun marrying people than sentencing drunk drivers or being the arbiter of petty disputes between Mr. Merrill and Mr. Gilbert, I'll tell you that."

"I bet," she smiles. "Um, so how does this work, exactly?" She thinks to ask, realizing now that she's not sure how a courthouse marriage actually works, she just figured they'd find out along the way.

"It's really straightforward actually, basically I just need to witness you both sign the license, that's the actual formality that means you're married. Now I have... ten minutes to spare though, so if you want to do something more, take any vows, have me say something more, exchange rings, we can do that. It's up to you!"

"Awesome," she looks to Jonathan who's beaming at her and shrugging his shoulders. "Well uh, we've already done vows but we do have rings. And uh... well I mean if you want to say something...?"

"Sure! I may not be a pastor but I'll try to dispense some advice at least, after all I've been happily married for 34 years now."

"Congratulations," Jonathan says.

"Thanks, you too! You're about to marry a beautiful girl you love, right?"

"Yes!"

"So you love each other, that's a good start! My advice is... well all that in sickness and in health stuff the priest would say, that's of course something but I think that's quite obvious. I'll just say: You love each other, I bet you know why you love each other, and the key to a marriage is simply to always always remember that. Be kind to one another, support one another and make each other happy. Sound good?" He grins.

"Yeah," they both concur.

"So, rings?"

She gets the rings from her purse, handing the one Jonathan bought her over to him, keeping the one she bought for him in her right hand. He gently grasps her left hand. He slides the ring against the scar on her palm before sliding it on her finger. The action gives her goosebumps. The ring fits snug and perfect. She beams at him, he looks happier than ever before. She takes his left hand and repeats his motion, sliding the ring against his matching scar before sliding it onto his finger.

"Lovely," the judge says after letting them have their moment uninterrupted. "Now if you both sign here at the bottom," he holds out a fountain pen and points to the document on his desk. She takes the pen and signs before handing it over to Jonathan who does the same. "I can now pronounce you husband and wife. Congratulations!"

Jonathan kisses her, and it's the happiest kiss of her lifetime, they both smile into it. It's sweet and short so she has to come back right away for another peck once they've broken apart.

They practically skip down the courthouse steps, they're so giddy, arms wrapped around each other.

"So what do you want to do now?" He asks as they walk to his car.

"Hm," she starts, grabbing his left arm and holding it up to look at his watch. It's only one o' clock. "Bet your house is still empty. Care to find out?"

"Yes!"

She's about to step on to the porch when he swoops in and picks her up. She lets out a surprised yelp as he lifts her and holds her in his strong arms. She automatically circles hers over his shoulders. She giggles uncontrollably as he carries her in through the front door, which she manages to open. He carries her all the way into his room.

"Dork, you're such a dork," she giggles as he sets her down and leans up to kiss him.

"You still married me," he grins.

"Yes I did," she grins. "Lucky you I'm a dork for dorks."

"Yes I'm very lucky."

"Me too."

"Jonathan? Nancy? Are you guys home?"

They've just been laying cuddled together for a long time now, in the afterglow of their first time together as husband and wife, or first times rather. But his mother's familiar voice calling out from the living room sends them both scrambling for their clothes. Nancy hastily throws her dress on again and hurriedly helps him button his shirt while he pulls on his pants again.

"Uh, yeah!" He calls out to his mother, praying it won't be too obvious what they've just been doing. Nancy smooths down his bedhead and fixes her own curls a little and they venture out.

Oh God, it's really very obvious. His mom takes one look at them and he wants to sink through the floor. Nancy grasps his hand and it feels like maybe that's the only thing preventing him from literally doing it. He can tell she's trying to keep some composure even though she's blushing profusely just like he knows he's doing.

"Hey so uh... um... how are you guys?" His mom hesitates, then thankfully seems to choose to just go the route of ignoring it.

"Good, good," Nancy answers for both of them. He nods.

"Are you two doing anything later?"

"No, not really."

"Good, I uh... wait, what's that?"

His mom points. Points to Nancy's free hand, the one he's not clutching. The one with the ring on it. Okay they really should have thought more about how they were going to break the news to their

families because he has no idea what to do now. He looks to Nancy for help. She's instinctively let go of his hand to grasp her left hand with it, wrapping her fingers around the ring. She looks at him and then simply shrugs. He nods. Right, might as well come right out with it.

"We uh... we got married."

He gages his mother's reaction closely. Her eyes go big, eyebrows shooting up and her mouth opens and shuts several times, like she's searching for words. Finally she finds some.

"You... you got married?"

"Yes..."

"When? Today?!"

"Yes."

His mom goes quiet again, processing further. Nancy explains more.

"At the courthouse. Uh... we just sort of decided to... do it."

"Uh-huh... um..."

"Sorry we didn't tell anyone," Nancy continues. "Sorry we just... we wanted to do this and we wanted to do it our way... We didn't want it to be a huge thing..."

"We just wanted it to be for us..."

"Yeah, not like uh... we really wanted to do it... I really wanted to marry Jonathan-"

"And I really wanted to marry Nancy."

"But we didn't want a huge ceremony with lots of people there like uh, knowing my parents, would've happened if we'd told them..."

"So we just wanted to do our own thing..."

"Sorry we didn't tell you but we just... yeah. We wanted to do this

our way. We love each other, we're gonna spend the rest of our lives together and we wanted to start the rest of our lives out however we wanted, and we just couldn't wait to do it," he tells his mother with conviction. Nancy grabs his hand again.

His mother looks at them for a long moment. His stomach drops when he notices her eyes starting to well up. But then a smile grows on her features and suddenly she's stepping towards them.

"Oh, sweethearts..."

She wraps them both up in a big hug. They both return the hug, Nancy smiling at him.

"You crazy sweethearts..." his mom continues when she's finally released them from the embrace. She grasps both his and Nancy's left hands, peering at the rings. "You crazy in love sweethearts," she continues to mumble. "I can't believe you just did this! But you're happy? You're both sure about this?"

"Yes," they both answer at the same time. "Very happy. Very sure."

"Well then that's what matters. And I guess I can't be that surprised. You two belong together. You're perfect together," his mom gushes, pulling them both in for another hug.

"You're not mad?" He asks, to make sure.

"How can I be mad when my little boy just married the girl of his dreams?! Come here sweetheart," his mom exclaims and pulls him in for an individual hug. "I love you very much."

"I love you too, mom."

"And you too sweetie, come here," his mom then turns to Nancy and pulls her in for a hug. "You've already been part of it for awhile now in my eyes but I guess this makes it more official. Welcome to the family sweetheart."

"Thank you," Nancy mumbles into his mom's neck.

"And I love you as well, just so you know."

"I love you too," Nancy answers in a small voice. When his mom finally releases her, Nancy's wiping at her eyes.

"I really do," his mom smiles.

"I know, thank you," Nancy smiles through tears. He wraps his arm around her.

"So you just decided to do this today?!"

"Well... really yesterday... Driving back we were talking... about the future and stuff and just realized... we both want this so why wait? So we just went for it. Turns out there's no waiting period on marriage licenses in Indiana."

"Oh believe me, I know," his mom says. At their questioning looks she seems to catch herself. "Oh, I mean. Your father and me it wasn't exactly all planned out either you might say... but never mind that, I don't want to think about him on a great day like this, or at all really. It brought me you and Will at least and you're the best thing that ever happened to me. And now I'm so happy for you! You're everything you're father isn't and you two are so good for each other!"

Nancy hugs him closer. He nods and smiles. He really strives to be everything Lonnie is not. Nancy kisses his cheek. His mom keeps smiling wide at them. Then she seems to realize something.

"Oh..."

"What?"

"Nothing just... boy did you guys pick a day for this..."

"What?"

"Well I don't know how you planned to tell us all about this but uh... we kind of planned a surprise party for you."

"What? What for?"

"Who's 'we'?"

"Oh your mom and me. And the kids helped. A joint going away party before you head off to college! It was Jane's idea. We figured we'd do it early so it'd be a bigger surprise, plus we'll be busy packing later anyway."

"Oh, wow."

"I was coming to get you for it! It's at your house. Everyone is waiting."

"Oh..."

"So... I don't know how you want to play this but... I'm sure Karen will understand!"

"Um... well... maybe... eventually. I mean... she loves Jonathan, but... wow she's not going to be cool about this," Nancy laments, looking at him.

"It will come as shock, sure, but she will be happy you're happy!"

"Sure... but also unhappy about missing out on organizing her oldest daughter's wedding. When my cousin got married she helped my aunt plan the whole thing, it was so over the top and she kept talking about what she'd do differently 'for the next one' and giving me this look... And oh god, my dad's going to assume I'm pregnant."

"You're not, right?!" His mom quickly asks.

"No!"

"Thought so. Well then that's fine then. Listen, they will understand, eventually. And I'll back you up."

"They're here!"

"Surprise!"

In her backyard her parents, Holly, Mike, Jane, Will, Lucas, Max and Hopper are waiting. They've put out a table and she can see her mom must've been in the kitchen all day preparing for this. She holds

Jonathan's left hand, covering his ring with her hand while making sure to keep her left hand hidden behind her back for the time being. They talked in the car and came to the conclusion that ripping the bandaid off quick is the best way to go, but she figures they shouldn't dive straight into it but at least acknowledge the lovely gesture of the party thrown for them.

"Wow guys, this is so nice," she smiles.

"Yes, wow you didn't have to do this," Jonathan tacks on.

"Were you surprised?" Jane giddily asks.

"Oh uh, yes," she tries as she realizes they forgot to act surprised despite Joyce's reminder to do so in the car.

"Very surprised," Jonathan says, trying to work up the intonation in his voice.

They all see right through it, even Jane.

"Mom..." Will sighs.

"Sorry, it was hard to trick them?" Joyce tries.

"Still, this is so sweet," she says. "Thank you guys."

She tries to act normal. She looks to Jonathan. She can tell he's trying very hard to do the same. She wonders if they're pulling it off.

"What's going on?"

They're not. Mike asks the penetrating question in his straight-forward manner.

"What?" She tries.

"You're acting weird. What's going on?"

"Nothing," Jonathan deflects.

But everyone keeps staring at them. So, to hell with it, she thinks.

"We got married!"

Bandaïd ripped.

She shows her left hand. Clutches Jonathan's tighter with her right. The stares are now combined with gaping mouths.

"You- you what?" Her mother asks in disbelief.

"We got married," she repeats. "Today, at the courthouse."

"W-why?"

"Are you pregnant?" Her father asks in his stern voice. She was right.

"No!" She calls back. "We got married because we wanted to."

"B-but why?"

"Why?! Because I love Jonathan and he loves me and we're going to be together forever so why not?"

"You're so young..."

"We're both 18. And you weren't much older than me when you married dad!"

"That's not the same that's not... honey you can't be sure of what you want already-"

"Yes I can. Why not? I know what I want. I want Jonathan, I want to become a journalist, I want to move out of here and see the world."

"I know it seems sudden, Mrs. Wheeler, Mr. Wheeler. But we're sure about this. Never been more sure of anything in my life," Jonathan looks her mother and then her father in the eyes and calmly states.

"You know, it used to be common courtesy to ask for the father in law's blessing before you whisked a young girl off to tie the knot," her dad mutters, looking back at Jonathan. She's about to tear into him but Jonathan beats her to it.

"With all due respect Mr. Wheeler, I don't think I need to ask anyone

other than Nancy. It's her life, it's her choices."

"But why... why now... like this? The *courthouse*..." her mother is still trying to wrap her head around it.

"Because that's what we wanted to do. We didn't want a big wedding, mom. We just wanted to get married."

"But honey a wedding... a real wedding is... won't you regret not having one?"

"Nope. It was perfect. It was us."

"And how am I going to explain this to everyone in the family... why they weren't invited, why..."

"Just tell them I married the love of my life and if they ask why they weren't invited tell them the truth? That no one was. That we're in love and wanted to do it our way. Mom, it's my life. Not yours, not theirs. I'll do it my way, I'm not asking you to agree with how I do it I'm just asking you to understand that I want to do it my way. And you don't have to answer for my choices, I'll do that."

Her mother looks at them for a long moment and then sighs.

"Well. I'll try to understand. I still wish you would've told me. We could've thrown such a wonderful wedding. But... congratulations sweetheart."

Her mother hugs her and then Jonathan. Smacks her father on the arm and he mumbles a congratulations too while her mother inspects the rings. The kids have all been quiet watching the exchange. Now Will steps forward though, big smile on his face.

"This is so cool! When did you ask her?"

"Yesterday but it was sort of a... mutual plan," Jonathan smiles. She nods. She then looks at her little brother.

"Mike, you haven't got anything to say?"

"It's cool. He makes you way cooler than you really are so congrats,"

Mike shrugs. She's about to snark back at him but then his eyes go big as he realizes something. He puts a hand to Will's shoulder. "Hey we're brothers in law now!"

"Oh yeah! Awesome!" Will exclaims and they high five.

Jane steps forward too and looks at her ring.

"Pretty. But I thought wedding's were like on TV? In church with people."

"Well, that's one way to have it but you can also just go to the courthouse and do it quickly, like we did."

"I thought the other kind looked fun on TV. I wished I could go to a wedding like that, with people and then there's a big party after."

"Well, you set up this party for us anyway which is really nice so we can just have that as wedding reception?" She suggests. "We just wanted the ceremony for ourselves. But hey, do you want to be my maid of honor?"

She pushes away the thought that Barb was supposed to have been it. But without her here, Jane is the obvious choice even though they didn't really think about those things. She's not even sure there is a need for a maid of honor after the ceremony but Jane's eyes light up and she figures they've already done it their way so far so they can just continue to make it up as they go along.

"Yes! Oh my god really? What do I get to do?"

"Of course! And I don't know really, the maid of honor is there for the bride and helps her with stuff and you've already done that like fixing the party and all. But it's a special title for special people, and you're special to me. You're my sister in law now after all."

"I am?" Jane's mouth forms an O.

"Well, you're my sis, right?" Jonathan smiles.

Jane hugs them both.

"Hey if she's maid of honor, do I even have to ask about...?" Will grins.

"Yes, you're best man," Jonathan rolls his eyes and pulls his brother into a hug.

Hopper, Lucas and Max congratulate them, and Holly trots up and looks fascinated by the shiny rings.

"Hey sorry we're late, did we miss anything?"

They all turn around at the sound of Dustin's voice. He's got Steve with him.

"Oh nothing much, just that Nancy and Jonathan got married," Mike answers.

Steve's looks like he's about to faint.

"Are you... are you pregnant?" He asks, echoing her dad. Jesus.

"NO!"

"Morning, my husband," she tiredly smiles at him as she steps into their kitchen. She loves saying that because he gets the dopiest grin on his face every time still, two weeks into marriage.

"Morning, my wife," he smiles back. "Sleep well?"

"Mm," she comes forward and hugs him from behind where he's standing by the stove cooking breakfast. "Lucky me that I can get a classic Byers breakfast in New York too," she continues and presses a kiss to his cheek.

The big move was yesterday. She can't think of a better start to life in New York than this.

"It's actually a New York spin on a Byers breakfast. I got up early and found some bagels down the street," he points to a brown bag on the counter while moving the eggs in the pan with a spatula.

"Nice."

"What do you want to do today?"

"Well, we need to go shopping. But we also need to christen every room in this place," she grins.

"I love your ideas. Have I told you that before?"

"Hm, once or twice or a hundred times."

She sneaks herself in between him and the kitchen counter, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him again, on the lips this time.

"It's a big city, there's lots to see. We should go exploring. But I think we should start right here..."

"Sounds like a plan," he smiles and kisses her.

"After breakfast though. All this and you cook too," she looks him up and down and waggles her eyebrows. "To think my parents didn't get why I married you..."

"And you're all this and a great shot. No wonder my mom totally got why I married you," he smirks back before pressing his lips to hers again.

She smiles into the kiss, she's giddy, excited. She's out of Hawkins. She's with Jonathan. They've got a cramped Brooklyn apartment and time to explore the whole world together.

She's never retreated again after that night, only moving forward instead. And it's led her to the best place, because the best place is being right next to him. They've got everything. Chemistry. History. The real shit, shared trauma. And a *future*, together.